



MISS SILVER
DEALS
WITH DEATH

A MISS SILVER MYSTERY

PATRICIA
WENTWORTH





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Patricia Wentworth



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ONE

MEADE UNDERWOOD WOKE with a start. Something had waked her – some sound – but she did not know what it was. It had startled her back from a dream in which she walked with Giles Armitage – Giles who was dead. But in her dream he wasn't dead, but warm and alive, and they walked together and were glad.

She listened for the sound that had waked her with bitter resentment in her heart. Only once before had he been so near to her in a dream. Sometimes he called her in a voice which wrung her heart, sometimes he whispered and she could not catch the words, but in this one dream there had been no words at all, only a deep and satisfied content.

And she had waked. They had found each other, and she had waked and lost him all over again. She sat up and listened. It was the third time she had waked like this in the night with that sense of sound heard in sleep. There was no sound now. Her waking memory had no knowledge of what the sound had been. Wind? The night was still. A passing car – the hoot of an owl – a bat brushing against the window – someone moving here, or in the flat overhead... She rejected these things one by one. A car would not have startled her. It wasn't an owl – not that sort of sound, not a cry at all – somehow she did know that. And not a bat. Who had ever heard of a bat blundering up against a window? The floors in this old house were much too solid and thick to let any sound come through from above, and in the flat around her no one stirred.

She had turned instinctively to the window. There was a moon, but its light was thickly veiled. A luminous mist hung there like a curtain, hiding the night sky and the trees which should have been massed against it – two old elms, relics perhaps of a time when the garden boundary was a hedgerow and the place where the house now stood an open field. She went over and looked out. The old-fashioned sash window, too heavy to move without a pulley, was open as far as it would go. That is to say, the top half had been pulled right down behind the lower pane. Meade had therefore two thicknesses of glass to look through, and the mist beyond that again.

She put her hand to the pulley and raised both panes. Now the bottom half of the window was clear. But the mist was still there, white with the light of the unseen moon but quite impenetrable. She could see nothing at all. Leaning out over the sill, she could hear nothing either. The still misty night, the moon veiled, the house asleep, only Meade Underwood awake, brought her back from her happy dream to a world where Giles Armitage lay drowned beneath the sea.

She kneeled down by the window and stayed there, her elbows on the sill, her thoughts bitter and sad. There hadn't been any sound at all. She had waked and lost her dream of Giles because she was a coward, because her nerves still played her false, startling her out of sleep with an echo of the crash which had roused them all three months ago in mid Atlantic. She ought to be over it by now, she ought to be well. She wanted to be at work, too busy to hear what she had heard that night or see what she had seen. Her ribs had mended and the broken arm was sound again. Hearts take longer to mend than bones. She would not have minded dying with Giles, but he had died alone, and she had waked in a hospital ward to hear that his life was gone and hers was left to her.

She kneeled there, bringing up her courage to meet an agony of depression, fighting it back inch by inch – 'I shall be able to work soon, and then it will be better. They'll let me join something. I'm doing half a day at those parcels now – that's better than nothing. Everyone's so kind, even Aunt Mabel – I wish I liked her better. But she's been so kind. Only it'll be much easier when I can get right away and not have people being sorry for me.'

The mist came chill against her face, her breast, her bare arms. It pressed against her eyes like

bandage. Mary Hamilton's lament came wailing through her mind: 'They'll tie a bandage round my eyes and no let me see to dee.' Horrible! That was what it had been like on the night when the ship went down – when Giles went down. A shudder went over her from head to foot. She wrenched away from the thought and sprang up. How many thousands of times had she said, 'I won't look back – I won't remember.' If you keep the door shut upon the past, it can't get at you. It's gone, it's dead, it's over. No one can make you live it again except yourself – that traitor self which creeps out to unbar the bolts and let the enemy past creep in upon you again. She would have no traitors in her citadel. She must look to her bars and wait until the enemy tired and fell away.

She got into bed and lay down. The stillness of the night came nearer. Strange to think of this big house and all the people in it, and no sound, not so much as a breath, to show that it was inhabited.

Perhaps it wasn't. When we are asleep, where are we? Not in the place where our bodies lie without sight or sense. Where had she been herself before she waked? She had walked with Giles—

The barred door was opening again. She thrust it to. 'Don't think about yourself. You mustn't! Don't you hear – you mustn't! Think about all the other people in the house – not about yourself or Giles or Giles—'

The house – the people—

Vandeleur House – four stories and a basement set in what had once been a field bordered by a lane when Putney was a village in the days before London swallowed it up. A big square house, shortly now of most of its grounds and turned into flats. Vandeleur had lived and painted there – old Joseph Vandeleur who had been called the English Winterhalter. He had certainly rivalled that celebrated court painter in the number of times he had painted Prince Albert, Queen Victoria, and all the little princes and princesses. He had painted Mr Gladstone and Lord John Russell, he had painted Dizzy and Pam, he had painted the Duke of Wellington and the Archbishop of Canterbury. He had painted all the lovely ladies of the day and made them even lovelier, and all the plain ones and made them interesting. A tactful man, a charming host, a liberal friend, he had painted his way to fame, fortune, and a well-dowered wife.

Vandeleur House had been graced by the presence of Royalty. A thousand candles had lighted its chandeliers. Five thousand roses had decorated it for a ball. Now, where the large, well-garnished rooms had been, there were flats, two to each floor – eight flats, and a basement given over to central heating, luggage-rooms, and a caretaker. The large kitchen no longer sent out generous steaming meals, course upon unnecessary course. Instead each flat had its kitchenette, an exiguous slip of room into which had been crowded a sink, an electric cooking-stove, and some cleverly planned cupboards. The fine staircase had given place to a lift and a narrow concrete stair, cold and uncarpeted, winding its way from floor to floor about the lift-shaft.

All this was familiar and present to Meade Underwood's mind. She began to go over the flats and the people in them. It was better than counting sheep, because there was more to fix your attention on. There was so little about sheep to hold the thought or to keep it from slipping back to that closed and bolted door. But you could be interested in people. She began to go over the people in her mind, counting them up.

Begin at the bottom. Old Bell in the basement – James Bell – old Jimmy Bell, porter and caretaker. With a warm, fuggy layer tucked in between the furnace and one of the luggage-rooms. A cheerful old man, Jimmy Bell. Face like a withered apple, and a bright blue eye. 'Morning, miss. Morning, Mrs Underwood. Oh, yes, it'll clear. Why, it stands to reason rain can't keep on falling. Perhaps it couldn't – perhaps the sun would shine again some day.

Flat No. 1 – old Mrs Meredith, who went out all bundled up with shawls in a bath-chair. How dreadful to be nothing more than a bundle of shawls. Better to be unhappy, better to be anything than to be alive than to have forgotten what it was like to live. Better to break your heart for a dead love

than to have lost the memory of love. She pulled away from that. Mrs Meredith's companion, Miss Crane, an easy, tattling person – large round glasses and a plump pale face. Mrs Meredith's sour-faced maid who never spoke to anyone. There they were, the three of them, asleep now. She wondered if Packer's trap of a mouth loosened at all or fell open in sleep.

In the other ground-floor flat, Mrs and Miss Lemming. She felt sorry for Agnes Lemming, the drudge of a selfish mother. She wouldn't be so plain if she took any trouble over herself. But it was Mrs Lemming who had the new clothes, the permanent waves, the facial treatments, and who still carried herself with the air of a beauty and got away with it – lovely white hair, and those fine eyes and a really marvellous complexion. Poor Agnes, she had a nice smile, but so little use for it – all the work of the flat to do, and endless errands to run besides. 'I wish they'd call her up. It would give her a chance to be a human being instead of a slave. I suppose she must be thirty-five.'

Number 3 – the Underwood flat. Just now it contained herself, Aunt Mabel, and, in the slip of a maid's bedroom, Ivy Lord. Uncle Godfrey was away in the north. She loved Uncle Godfrey – quiet, gentle, shy – Wing-Commander Underwood, with a D.F.C. Now how in this world did he come to marry Aunt Mabel? They simply didn't belong. Perhaps it was because he was shy and she saved him the trouble of talking. Anyhow there they were, nearly sixteen years married and very fond of each other. An odd sort of world.

Over the way, in No. 4, Miss Garside – elderly, dignified, aloof. 'Thinks herself somebody,' thought Aunt Mabel. 'And who is she anyway?' 'Well, Miss Garside was Miss Garside. She came of an intellectual family. She had what Mrs Underwood stigmatised as 'highbrow' tastes. Her figure and her ideas were equally unbending. The eyes which looked past her neighbours quite possibly saw the stars. Meade thought she might be anywhere, in any time. Not here. I wonder where she is now.'

Easier to speculate about Mr and Mrs Willard in No. 5. She could picture him sleeping neatly without a wrinkle in sheet or pillow. He would, of course, have taken his glasses off, but otherwise he would be just the same as when he was awake – dapper even in pyjamas, his hair unruffled, his gasmask handy. Of all the people in the house, she could feel least sure that he would have escaped into a dream. Does a Civil Servant ever escape? Does he ever want to?

Mrs Willard in the other twin bed with the bedside table between her and Mr Willard. In the daytime both beds had spreads of rose-coloured art silk embroidered in a rather frightful pattern of blue and purple flowers which had never bloomed outside the designer's imagination. Now at night they would be tidily folded up and put away. Mr Willard would see to that.

It was not in Mrs Willard to be neat. She had hair which had stopped being brown without getting on with the business of going grey. It had more ends than you would have thought possible, and they all stuck out in different directions. She had rather a London accent, and she wore the most distressing clothes, but she was nice. She called you 'Dearie', and somehow you didn't mind. Where did she go in her dreams? Meade thought it would be a nursery with lots of jolly children – something very small in a cot, twins in rompers, grubby little schoolboys bouncing in, a girl with a long fair plait.... But Mrs Willard hadn't any children – she had never had any. Poor Mrs Willard.

Opposite in Flat 6, Mr Drake. Or perhaps not. He was often out quite late – later than this. You could hear his step on the gravel before the house. She wondered if he was out now, or only away in a dream. And what would Mr Drake's dream be like? An odd-looking person – black eyebrows like Mephistopheles, and very thick iron-grey hair. What he did and where he went when he wasn't in his flat, nobody seemed to know. Always very polite if you met him in the lift, but no one got farther than that. Mrs Willard opined that he had a secret sorrow.

Up to the top of the house now. No. 7 was shut up. The Spooners were away. Mr Spooner, torn from his warehouse (wool), his stout form most unbecomingly clothed in khaki, but still cheerful, still facetious, still talking about the 'little woman'. Mrs Spooner, in the A.T.S., youngish, prettyish.

anxious, trying to be bright. Trying very hard. She came up sometimes. Perhaps her dreams were giving her back the world which had been snatched away – a little pleasant world with little gossiping bridge parties; a new frock, a new hat; going with Charlie to the pictures and coming home to a cosy little supper – a trivial world, but all she had, not to be found anywhere now except in a dream.

The eighth flat, and the last. Miss Carola Roland – stage girl with a stage name. Meade wondered what she had started with. Not Carola, and not Roland – there wasn't any doubt about that. Whatever the pretty, pert child had been called, and whatever colour her hair had been then, at somewhere in her twenties she was still pert, still pretty, and the perfect peroxide blonde.

Meade was getting sleepy. Carola Roland – she's frightfully pretty – wonder why she lives here so dull for her – she won't stay – wonder why she came – wonder what she dreams about – diamonds and champagne – bubbles rising in a full golden glass – bubbles rising in the sea – the rocking of a ship. She was back in her own dream again.

In the room next door Mrs Underwood slept heavily, her hair in wavers, her face well creamed, her shoulders propped upon three large pillows, her window open, as Meade's had been, at the top of the flat. The moonlit mist was close against the double panes. It hung like a curtain across the gap above them. Something moved in the mist, moved across the panes, across the gap. There was a faint creaking sound, as if a hand had leaned upon the frame of those double panes. There was another sound, much fainter, audible only to the finest waking sense. But no one waked, no one heard anything at all. Something as light as a leaf slipped to the floor inside the window and lay there. The shadow passed on, passed Meade's window, open at the bottom now. No handhold there. Nothing but smooth, cold glass above and empty space below.

Moving without haste and without delay, the shadow went by. It passed across the window and was gone. There had been no sound at all.

Meade was in her dream, but Giles wasn't there any longer. It was dark. She wandered in the dark, seeking him desperately and in vain.

TWO

IN A MOMENT of relaxation Miss Silver rested her hands upon the Air Force sock which she was in the process of knitting and contemplated her surroundings. A feeling of true thankfulness possessed her. So many poor people had been bombed out of their homes and had lost everything, but her modest flat in Montague Mansions remained unscathed – not even a window broken.

‘Quite providential,’ was her comment as she looked about her and noted the blue plush curtains, their colour a little dimmed after three years of wear but they had cleaned remarkably well; the brightly patterned Brussels carpet; the wallpaper with its floral design, a trifle faded but not noticeably so unless one of the pictures was removed. She saw all these things and admired them. Her eye wandered from the engraving of Landseer’s *Monarch of the Glen* in a contemporary frame to a yellow maple to similarly framed reproductions of *Bubbles*, *The Soul’s Awakening*, and *The Black Brunswicker*. Her heart was really quite full of thankfulness. A comfortable and tasteful room in a comfortable and tasteful flat. During the years when she had worked as a governess for the meagre salary which was all that a governess could then command she had never had any grounds for hoping that such comfort would be hers. If she had remained a governess, there would have been no plush curtains, no Brussels carpet, no steel engravings, no easy chairs upholstered in blue and green tapestry with curving walnut legs, Victorian waists, and wide well-padded laps. By a strange turn of events she had ceased to be a governess, and had become a private investigator, and so successful had her investigations proved that they had made possible the plush, the tapestry, the walnut, and the Brussels pile. Deeply and sincerely religious, Miss Silver thanked what she was accustomed to call Providence for her preservation throughout two years of war.

She was about to resume the sock, which she was knitting for her youngest nephew Alfred who had just entered the Air Force, when the door opened and her valuable middle-aged Emma announced ‘Mrs Underwood.’ There came in one of those plump women whose clothes fit them with unbecoming exactness. Mrs Underwood’s black cloth suit moulded her too frankly. She wore a little too much face powder, a little too much lipstick, and it would have been better if she had dispensed altogether with eye shadow. The waves of her hair, under one of the odd hats just then affected by the ultra smart, were too set, too formal, too fresh from the hairdresser’s hands. Her skirt was too short and her stockings too thin for a pair of buxom legs, and if her shoes were not so tight as to be excruciatingly painful they very much belied their appearance. She advanced with a bright smile and an extended hand.

‘Oh, Miss Silver, I am sure you have not the least idea who I am, but we met a few weeks ago at Mrs Moray’s – Mrs Charles Moray – dear Margaret – such a charming person – and as I happened to be passing I thought I must come in and see you! Now don’t say you have forgotten our meeting, for I should never have forgotten you!’

Miss Silver smiled and shook hands. She remembered Mrs Underwood very well, and Charles Moray saying, ‘Poor old Godfrey Underwood’s fiasco and the most crashing silly bore in the Home Counties. She hangs round Margaret’s neck like the Ancient Mariner and the albatross. No resolution – that’s what’s the matter with Margaret. Does she take the woman out and push her under a tram? No, she asks her to tea, and I shall probably throw the milk-jug at her if it goes on.’

Miss Silver said briskly,

‘How do you do, Mrs Underwood? I remember you very well.’

The lady sat down. There were two rows of pearls upon her bosom. They rose and fell a little more rapidly than was natural. Their owner had presumably come up in the lift, yet from the evidence

of the pearls she might very well have taken the three flights of stairs at a run.

~~Rejecting such an absurd supposition, Miss Silver wondered why Mrs Underwood should be so nervous, and whether her visit was to be regarded as a professional one. She said, breaking in upon some negligible remark about the weather,~~

‘I beg your pardon, Mrs Underwood, but it is always best to come straight to the point. Had you any special reason for wishing to see me, or is this merely a friendly call?’

Mrs Underwood changed colour. It was not a becoming change. Beneath the powder her skin was suffused with an ugly pinkish mauve. She laughed on rather a high note.

‘Oh, but of course – any friend of dear Margaret’s – and I just happened to be passing. Quite a coincidence in its way. There I was, walking down the street, and when I looked up and saw Montagu Mansions just across the way I felt I really couldn’t pass you by.’

Miss Silver’s needles clicked. The Air Force sock revolved. She reflected on the sad prevalence of untruthfulness – a distressing fault which should be wisely and firmly corrected in the young. She said a little primly,

‘And how did you know that I lived here, Mrs Underwood?’

That unbecoming flush came up again.

‘Oh, Margaret Moray mentioned it, you know – she just happened to mention it – and I felt I could *not* pass your very doorstep without coming in. What a nice flat you have here. A flat is so much more convenient than a house – don’t you think so? No stairs. I don’t wonder maids won’t go to those basement houses. And then if you want to go away you have only to put your front door key in your pocket, and there you are.’

Miss Silver said nothing. Her needles clicked. She supposed that her visitor would presently come to the point. Not a very agreeable speaking voice – high-pitched, and with something of the sound given out by china with a crack in it.

Mrs Underwood continued to talk.

‘Of course there are drawbacks. When I lived in the country I adored my garden. I delight in a garden, but my husband was obliged to be nearer his work – the Air Ministry, you know. And then when he was ordered up north, well, there I was with the flat on my hands, and if it hadn’t been for the war, I could have let it a dozen times over, but of course nobody wants to take flats in London now. Not that it’s really in London – Putney, you know – one of those delightful old houses which used to be right in the country. It belonged to Vandeleur, the artist, who made such a lot of money painting the royal family when Queen Victoria had all those children, so of course he became the rage and made a fortune, which artists hardly ever do, but I think he had private means as well. It must have been a dreadfully expensive house to keep up. I believe it stood empty for a long time after he died, and then they turned it into flats. But the garden isn’t what it was – of course gardeners are almost impossible to get – and I would like to be nearer my husband, but as for getting anything reasonable, well, I do go and see a bungalow just the other day – three rooms and a kitchen, and they were asking five and half guineas a week for it—’

‘These exorbitant prices should be controlled,’ said Miss Silver briskly.

‘So I decided to stay where I was.’

‘Very sensibly, I am sure.’

‘Though, as I said, there are drawbacks, living at such close quarters with other people. There are eight flats, and – well, I expect you know how it is, you come up in the lift with people, so you can’t help knowing them by sight, can you?’

Miss Silver supposed not.

The pearls rose and fell. Mrs Underwood went on.

‘So in a way you know them, and in a way you don’t. And the ones you wouldn’t mind being

friendly with aren't always the ones that want to be friendly with you. Miss Garside now – I don't know who she is to give herself such airs, but she's got a way of looking across the lift at you as if you were on the other side of the street and she'd never seen you before and wouldn't know you from Adam if she met you again. Downright rude I call it. Then on the other hand there are people you don't know anything about – and I'm sure I haven't got anything against anybody, and you can't be too careful what you say, but Meade is a very attractive girl, and though she's my husband's niece and not mine, I don't make any difference on that account, and I'm very pleased to give her a home while she wants one – but having a girl in the flat, well, you have to be more careful than you would be on your own account.'

Miss Silver began to see a glimmer of light.

'Has anyone been annoying your niece?'

'Well, she's my husband's niece – I told you that, didn't I – but as I said, I don't let it make any difference. Oh, no, nobody's been annoying her, and I'm sure the flats are all let to a very good class of people – I wouldn't like to give a wrong impression about that.'

Miss Silver wondered just what impression she did wish to convey. Whilst she had been talking about the late Mr Vandeleur and his house her breathing had been normal. Now it was becoming hurried again. That there was something on her mind was certain. Whatever it was, it had become sufficiently urgent to take her through the successive stages of applying to Margaret Moray for Miss Silver's address and then bringing her from Putney to Montague Mansions. But there the impulse appeared to have failed. It was not the first time that a visitor who might have been a client had come as Mrs Underwood had come, and in the end gone nervously away with a fear unspoken or a call for help withheld.

The idea that this plump, fashionable lady might be the prey of some secret terror brought a smile to Miss Silver's lips. She knew fear when she saw it. Mrs Underwood was certainly afraid. She said,

'It is very important to get the right impression about everyone. Things are not always what they seem – are they?'

Mrs Underwood's eyelids came down. It was as if she had pulled down a blind, but not quite quickly enough. In the instant before it fell terror had stared out of the window – the sheer naked terror of the creature in a trap.

Miss Silver looked across her knitting and said,

'What are you afraid of, Mrs Underwood?'

Plump gloved hands fumbled in a shiny bag. A handkerchief came out. The powdered face was dabbed. The voice which had been so high and sharp fell to a murmur about the heat.

'So warm – so very close—'

There were little glistening beads of sweat on the upper lip. The handkerchief dabbed, and came away stained with lipstick. Tragedy in caricature – rather horrid. The lady was so plump, so smart, so underbred, so *frightened*. Miss Silver preferred a client who engaged her sympathies, but her sense of duty was inexorable. She said in a kind, firm tone,

'Something has frightened you. You came here to tell me about it, did you not? Will you not do so?'

THREE

MRS UNDERWOOD GAVE a little gasp.

‘I don’t know, I’m sure. Well, really it’s nothing. It’s such a very warm day, don’t you think?’

‘I think that something has frightened you,’ said Miss Silver, ‘and I think that you had better tell me about it. If we share our troubles we halve them.’

Mabel Underwood drew a long breath. With a sudden drop into simplicity she said,

‘You wouldn’t believe me.’

Miss Silver smiled. She said,

‘I can believe anything, Mrs Underwood.’

But the moment of simplicity had passed. The pearls rose and fell rapidly.

‘I’m sure I can’t think why I said that. Girls do walk in their sleep once in a way, and it’s nothing to make a to-do about.’

‘Has your niece been walking in her sleep?’

‘Oh, no – not Meade. But I’m sure if it were, it wouldn’t be at all surprising, poor girl, after all she’s been through.’

Miss Silver had picked up her knitting again. The needles clicked encouragement.

‘Indeed?’

‘Oh, yes. She was torpedoed, you know – at least the ship was. She took her brother’s children over to America last year, after he was killed in France. Their mother is American, and she was out there visiting her people and quite distracted, poor thing, so Meade took the children out to her. And then, of course, she couldn’t get home again, not till June. And the ship was torpedoed and she was all smashed up, poor girl, and lost her fiancé as well – at least they hadn’t given it out, but she met him in the States. He was on one of those hush-hush missions – something about tanks, I believe, but perhaps I oughtn’t to say so, though I don’t suppose it matters now, because he was drowned. Of course it was a most dreadful shock for Meade.’

Mrs Underwood had certainly found her tongue. Miss Silver recalled Charles Moray’s ‘A gushing gasbag’, and Margaret’s ‘Charles, *darling* – gas doesn’t gush!’ She gave a slight cough and said.

‘Naturally. But you say it is not your niece who walks in her sleep.’

Mrs Underwood dabbed at her lips.

‘Well, I don’t know – I didn’t think about it being Meade – I thought it might be Ivy.’

‘Ivy?’

‘The maid, you know – Ivy Lord. I wouldn’t keep her, but they’re so scarce and difficult to get, you have to put up with anything.’

The needles clicked. Miss Silver said,

‘What makes you think this girl is walking in her sleep?’

Mrs Underwood gulped.

‘There was a letter on my floor.’

Miss Silver said, ‘Yes?’ and saw the mauvish colour run up into the plump, pale cheeks.

‘How could it have got there? I keep on trying to think of ways, but there aren’t any. I mean it wasn’t there when I went to bed and that’s flat. And if it wasn’t there then, who put it there – that’s what I want to know. The flat was all locked up for the night, and there was just me and Meade and Ivy inside, and the very first thing I saw when I woke up in the morning was that bit of paper lying right under the window.’

‘A bit of paper, or a letter?’

Mrs Underwood dabbed her forehead.

~~‘It was a bit torn off my own letter, and it was lying there right under the window. And someone must have come into my room in the night and dropped it, for it wasn’t there when I went to bed – can swear to that.’~~ The dabbing hand was shaking. She dropped it into her lap and it lay there, she was clutching the handkerchief.

Miss Silver leaned forward.

‘Why does this frighten you so much? Is it because of something in the letter?’

The hand had stopped twitching and was clenched. Mrs Underwood said in a quick, breathless voice,

‘Oh, no – of course not – it was just a bit of business letter – it wasn’t important at all. I just didn’t know how it got there, and that frightened me. Very stupid, I’m sure – but this close weather and the war – well, it plays tricks with your nerves, don’t you think?’

Miss Silver coughed.

‘I am not troubled with nerves, I am thankful to say. They must be very disagreeable. Was it the letter you had received, or a letter you had written?’

Mrs Underwood had taken out her powder compact and was attending to her face.

‘Oh, one that I had written – nothing of any importance – just a torn piece, you know.’

‘And you had not posted it?’

The compact sagged in a shaking hand.

‘I – well, I—’

‘It had been posted then? It is really better to tell me the truth, Mrs Underwood. The letter had been posted, and that is why you were alarmed at finding a piece of it on your bedroom floor.’

Mrs Underwood opened her mouth and shut it again. Miss Silver was reminded of a fish gasping. Not an attractive resemblance. She said in her kind, firm voice,

‘If anyone is blackmailing you—’

Mrs Underwood put out both hands as if to push something away and said,

‘How did you know?’

Miss Silver smiled. It was a perfectly kind smile.

‘It is my business to know that sort of thing. You are frightened about a letter. That naturally suggests blackmail.’

Put like that, it seemed quite simple. Mrs Underwood experienced a sort of relief. The worst, almost the worst, was over. She had not thought that she could tell anyone – not even when she got the address from Margaret, not even when she came up in the lift and rang the bell – but since this dowdily-governessy person had guessed, there was no doubt that it would be a relief to talk about it. She needn’t tell her everything. Something in her shuddered and said, ‘Oh, no – *never!*’ But they could talk it over from the outside, as it were – they needn’t go farther than that. Like an echo of her thought, she heard Miss Silver say,

‘You need not tell me anything you do not want to.’

She sat back in her chair and said in her natural voice,

‘Well then, if you must know, I *had* posted it. That’s what gave me such a turn.’

‘You had posted a letter of which a fragment was found on your bedroom floor?’

‘Well, yes, I had. And that is what upset me.’

‘Dear me!’ said Miss Silver. ‘You wrote a letter and you posted it, and afterwards a piece of the letter was found lying under your window.’

‘That’s right.’

‘Did you post the letter yourself, or did you give it to your maid?’

‘Oh, no – I posted it myself, with my own hand.’

‘Did you make more than one copy of the letter?’

Mrs Underwood shook her head.

‘It was as much as I could do to write it once.’

Miss Silver knitted. After a moment she said,

‘Your letter was in reply to one from a person who is, or has been, blackmailing you. Do you know who this person is?’

The head with its tinted chestnut curls was shaken again. The mauvish colour rose.

‘I haven't an idea. There isn't anyone I can think of. There was an address, so I went to have a look – right the other side of London, but I went. And when I got there, it was nothing but a tobacconist's shop, and they said a lot of their customers called for their letters there, and made out it was all on account of people being bombed out – and I didn't believe a word of it, but they wouldn't tell me anything. So I posted my letter at the end of the street and came away.’

‘You posted that letter on the other side of London?’

Mrs Underwood nodded.

‘Yes, I did. And that's what gave me the turn, because how did it get back into Vandeleur House and how did that Ivy Lord come by a piece of it to drop in my room? Because that's what she must have done. Don't you see, if she got a bit of my letter walking in her sleep, it means the person I wrote it to is right there in one of those Vandeleur flats – and if that isn't awful, I don't know what is. I feel like having a heart attack every time I think about it, but I just can't stop thinking. And if she wasn't walking in her sleep, well, that's worse, isn't it? Because that means she's in with this wretch, whoever he is. And there's something crazy about it too, because what's the sense of dropping a piece of my letter like that? It would be just going out of her way to get herself into a mess, and no gain to anyone. So when I hadn't had a wink of sleep for two nights, I remembered what Margaret said about you and got the address and came. And that's the truth.’

Yes, that was the truth, and a different woman speaking it – a woman who had been country born and country bred, and who still retained a vein of country shrewdness. Charles Moray's crashing silence bore was in abeyance.

Miss Silver nodded approvingly.

‘Very well put, Mrs Underwood. You know, you should go to the police.’

The head was shaken again.

‘I can't.’

Miss Silver sighed.

‘They all say that, and so blackmail goes on. Have you paid anything yet?’

Mrs Underwood gulped.

‘Fifty pounds – and what I shall say to Godfrey, I'm sure I don't know!’

‘The money was in the letter you posted?’

‘Oh, no, that was in the first one, getting on for six months ago, just after Godfrey went up north. And this time I said I couldn't pay anything. And I can't – I haven't got it to give, Miss Silver. And that was what was on the torn bit of paper – “I haven't got it to give”.’

Miss Silver's needles clicked.

‘This person is threatening to tell your husband something. Why don't you tell him yourself?’

Mrs Underwood gave another of those distressing gasps. She said, ‘I can't!’ and left it at that.

Miss Silver shook her head reprovingly.

‘It would be very much better if you did. But I will not press you. What makes you think that that girl Ivy Lord may have been walking in her sleep? Do you know of her having done so on any previous occasion?’

Mrs Underwood stared.

‘Why – didn’t I tell you? That’s what comes of being upset – I thought I had. Why, the first thing Ivy told me was all about how she walked in her sleep, and after she found her shoes which she cleaned the night before all muddy in the morning, her aunt said she’d better take a job in a flat, and not on the ground floor either, because it wasn’t respectable for a girl to be going out lord knows where and lord knows when, with nothing on but her nightgown and a pair of lace-up shoes. I thought I’d told you.’

Miss Silver shook her head.

‘No, you didn’t tell me. What do you want me to do, Mrs Underwood? Would you like me to come down to Putney and see your maid?’

But Mabel Underwood was getting to her feet. Handkerchief and powder compact had gone back into the shiny black bag. The country voice and country manner had retired behind the facade of shrewd gentility. She said with the old affected accent,

‘Oh, no –I couldn’t dream of troubling you. I’m sure you’ve been most kind, but I wasn’t thinking of anything professional, you know – just a friendly call – but of course quite in confidence. I can rely upon that, can’t I?’

Miss Silver shook hands gravely. There was a hint of reproof in her voice as she said,

‘You can certainly rely upon that. Good-bye, Mrs Underwood.’

FOUR

MEADE HAD BEEN packing parcels for three hours. It tired her dreadfully. She came out into the street and walked to the corner. She hoped she wouldn't have to wait very long for a bus – not her usual one because she had to go to Harrods for Aunt Mabel. It was this sort of extra that was the last straw, but she couldn't say so, because that would invite the immediate retort, 'If you can't pack a few parcels and do five minutes' shopping to save me going right across London, how on earth do you think you're going to get on in the A.T.S.?'

She had to wait nearly ten minutes for her bus.

It was just on half-past five when she came out of Harrods by one of the side doors and met Giles Armitage face to face. Giles, looking down, saw a girl in a grey flannel suit and a small black hat – a little creature with cloudy hair and lovely eyes. The hair was dark, and the eyes of a deep pure green. They looked at him out of a small, peaked face, and all of a sudden they lit up and shone like stars. Colour rushed into the pale cheeks. Her hands clutched at his arm, and a very soft voice said,

'Giles—'

And then everything went out. The colour, the light, the breath which had carried his name – the whole of it all failed together. She gave at the knees, and if he hadn't been pretty quick with his arm she'd have been down on the pavement. A light little thing and easy enough to hold. It was rather like holding a kitten.

She knew him – that much was certain. He waved to a taxi which had just set down a fare, and she got into Meade in it.

'Get into the Park and drive slow. Go on till I tell you to stop.'

He got in and shut the door. The girl was lying back. Her eyes were open. Her hands came out to hold him, and before he knew what he was going to do he had his arm about her. She seemed to expect it, and so in some odd kind of a way did he. She held on to his arm as if she would never let him go. It seemed the most natural thing in the world. He had the most extraordinary desire to look after her, to put the colour back into her cheeks and the light into her eyes, yet as far as he could remember he had never seen her before. She was saying his name again: 'Giles – Giles – Giles—' A girl doesn't say a man's name like that unless she is awfully fond of him. The inconveniences of losing one's memory obtruded themselves. What did you say to a girl who remembered what you had forgotten?

She drew suddenly away and said in a different voice,

'Giles – what's the matter? Why don't you say anything? What is it? I'm frightened.'

Major Armitage was a man of action. This had got to be tackled. He tackled it. Those very bright blue eyes of his smiled at her out of the square, tanned face. He said,

'I say – please don't! I mean you won't faint again or anything like that will you? I'm the one who'll be frightened really. Won't you have a heart and help me out? You see, I've been torpedoed and I've lost my memory. I didn't know anything could make one feel such a fool.'

Meade slipped away from him into the corner of the seat. *Giles didn't remember her.* A frozen feeling gathered about her heart. She said,

'I won't faint.'

It hurt too much for that. He was Giles come back from the dead, and he was a stranger. He was looking at her just as he had looked the first time they met, at Kitty Van Loo's. And all of a sudden the frozen feeling went and her heart was warm again, because he had fallen in love with her then, at first sight, and if he had done it once, why shouldn't he do it again? What did it matter that he had forgotten? He was Giles, and she was Meade, and he was alive. 'Oh, God, thank you, thank you, f

letting Giles be alive!’

~~He saw the light and colour come back. It gave him the strangest feeling, as if he had created something. He said in a different voice,~~

‘Who are you?’

‘Meade Underwood.’

He repeated it, ‘Meade – Underwood – It’s a pretty name. Did I call you Meade?’

Something flickered and went again, like the flash of light off a bird’s wing. He couldn’t catch

She said,

‘Yes.’

‘Have I known you long?’

‘Not very long. We met in New York, on the first of May, at Kitty Van Loo’s. Do you remember her?’

He shook his head.

She looked at the bright blue eyes, at the crisp fair hair above the ruddy brown skin, and thought ‘He’s well – he’s alive. What does anything else matter?’ But she was glad that he didn’t remember Kitty Van Loo.

‘I don’t remember a thing, except about the job I went over there to do. I don’t remember going out there, or anything after Christmas ’39. Everything since then has just run into a fog as far as my personal recollection goes. Why’ – his voice changed – ‘I didn’t even remember about my brother Jack being killed. He was with me at Dunkirk, and somehow I knew he was dead, but I couldn’t remember anything about it – not a thing. I can’t now. I’ve had to get it all from a chap who was there with me. I can remember being in France, and getting away from Dunkirk, and the job I had at the War Office, but none of the personal things. I could tell them all about my job in the States – all the technical part. Funny, isn’t it, but I can remember a fellow in my first regiment, an extraordinarily fine bridge player. He used to get canned every night, but it never affected his game. I’ve seen him so that he couldn’t take in a word you said outside the play, but he knew every card that was out – never made a mistake. I suppose it’s something like that. Well, we met at Kitty Van Loo’s – and where did we go from there?’

He saw Meade sparkle. It went to his head a little. The whole thing was going to his head – the blend of the strange and the familiar. She said,

‘Oh, we went places.’

‘Nice places?’

‘Yes, nice places.’

‘Lots of them?’

‘Lots of them.’

‘And when did you come back?’

She was watching him. She said,

‘In June.’

She saw the blood run up under his skin.

‘But so did I – at least that’s what they tell me. That is to say, I started to come, and we were torpedoed.’ He laughed. ‘I was picked up by a tramp a couple of days later. I’d got hold of a grating and I believe they couldn’t get me to let go – had to more or less prise me off it. I don’t remember anything about it myself. I’d been hit on the head, and the next thing I knew I was in a hospital ward in New York, and nobody knew who I was. Well, that’s me. But you said June. I suppose the Atlantic wasn’t by any chance one of the places we went together.... Oh, it was? Well, I hope I saved your life.’

Meade nodded. For a moment she couldn’t speak. It was all too horribly, too vividly present again – the darkness, the noise, and those rending crashes – the rush of the water, coming in, sucking

them down – Giles lifting her, heaving her into the boat. She said,

‘You put me into one of the boats.’

‘You were all right – not hurt?’

‘My arm was broken, and some ribs. They’re all right now.’

‘Sure?’

‘Quite sure.’

They looked at one another. There was a silence. Just as it became unendurable, he said,

‘How well did we know each other, Meade?’

She closed her eyes. The lashes lay dark against her cheek. In three months she had not heard him say her name. When she had dreamt of him he had not said it. Now he was saying it like a stranger. It hurt too much. He said in a quick, anxious voice,

‘You look all in. Can’t I take you somewhere? Where would you like to go? I say, you’re not going to faint, are you?’

The lashes lifted. She looked at him. It was very disturbing. She said in a whispering voice,

‘I won’t if I can help it. I think I had better go home.’

FIVE

THEY SAID GOOD-BYE on the steps of Vandeleur House, with the taxi ticking away in the road on the other side of a massive Victorian shrubbery. There was daylight still, daylight falling into dusk – grey daylight – no colour, no sparkle, no sun. There would be a mist again tonight. Meade was in the very mood of the mist, so tired that she could hardly stand. Reaction from the shock of finding Giles, on top to find that she was forgotten, had left her as dull and lifeless as the day. They had met, they were saying good-bye, and perhaps they would never meet again. The pain of that came through the dullness and pierced her. He might just go away back to his job and think no more of their meeting than that it was a queer sort of business and best let alone. She must face it. It might very easily happen. He had been landed with a stupid fainting girl – for all he could remember, a total stranger. Men hated girls who cried and girls who fainted. He had been kind. Giles was kind. She had seen him being kind to stray dogs and tiresome old women – but once you got rid of the wretched lost creature you didn't go out of your way to look for any more trouble. So here she was saying good-bye to Giles. She mustn't cry, and she mustn't faint. She must go through with it decently.

She put out a hand and he took it. Then he took the other one and held them both. Giles always had such strong, warm hands. He said in a serious tone, halting a little over the words as if there was some strong feeling behind them,

'This is – all wrong – we oughtn't to be saying good-bye. It's hurting you, and I'd give anything not to hurt you. Will you *please* not be hurt, and let me go away and get hold of myself a bit? It knocked us both endways. What's your telephone number?'

This was so exactly Giles that she caught her breath on a laugh that hurt.

'You asked me that in New York, the first time we met.'

'I expect I did. Did you give it to me?'

'Oh, yes.'

'Well, you'll have to do it again. What is it?'

She repeated the number, and watched him write it down just as he had done that first time. But he'd got a new notebook. The other must be somewhere bobbing about in the Atlantic with her New York telephone number washed out of it as completely as she had been washed out of Giles' memory.

He put the notebook back in his pocket and took her hands again.

'I'll go now – but I'll ring you up. You won't mind?'

No, she wouldn't mind. She said so.

He held her hands for a moment longer, and then went away to where the taxi was waiting, his footsteps crunching cheerfully over the gravel.

Meade watched him go. If he was going to ring up, it wasn't really good-bye. Her heart warmed a little. She went up in the lift and got out at the first landing. The Underwoods' flat was No. 3. She would have to tell Aunt Mabel, and the sooner she did it the better. She wished with all her heart that she had never told anyone about Giles. When you are all smashed up in hospital and a very kind uncle comes and holds your hand, things come out. Besides, she had to know about Giles. Uncle Godfrey had been most awfully kind, but of course he had told Aunt Mabel and Aunt Mabel had told everyone in the world, so now she had to tell Aunt Mabel that Giles was alive and that he had forgotten her, so of course they were not engaged any more. She must get it over.

She got it over. It wasn't easy. Mabel Underwood did nothing to make it easier. She meant to be kind, but actually she was the last straw.

'He doesn't remember you?'

‘He doesn’t remember anything.’

– ‘But how perfectly extraordinary! Do you mean to say that he doesn’t remember his name?’

‘He remembers his name.’

‘Or who he is – or about his job in the States?’

‘He remembers that.’

Mrs Underwood’s voice became strident.

‘And he doesn’t remember you? My dear, it’s too thin! He’s trying to back out. Your Uncle Godfrey must see him at once. Don’t you worry – young men have these sort of turns, but your uncle will put it right. It’s not as if you hadn’t anyone to stand up for you. Don’t you worry – it’ll all come right.’

It was quite unbearable, but she had to bear it. Unkindness would have been easier. Aunt Mabel meant to be kind, but behind the kindness it was perfectly plain that she thought Giles Armitage a very good match for a penniless girl, and that she had no intention of letting him go.

Nothing lasts for ever. Meade was told that she didn’t look fit for anything but bed, to which haven she thankfully repaired. ‘And Ivy will bring you your supper. I’m going up to the Willards for some bridge.’

Blessed relief, even though she knew that the Willards would be told about Giles and treated as Mabel Underwood’s views upon the management of recalcitrant young men. It wasn’t any good thinking about it. Aunt Mabel was like that, and you just had to let it go.

She lay there and let everything go. No use thinking, no use planning, no use hoping, no use grieving.

Ivy came in with a tray – fish cakes and a cup of Ovaltine. Meade, sitting up in bed, thought, ‘She doesn’t look any too good herself. I wonder if she is unhappy.’ She said on the impulse,

‘You look tired, Ivy. Are you all right?’

‘Got a bit of a head – nothing to write home about.’

A London girl, small and thin, with a pale, sharp face and lank brown hair.

‘Where is your home?’

Ivy jerked a shoulder.

‘Haven’t got one – not to speak of. Gran’s being ’vacuated. Ever such a nice lady she’s got billeted with. Bottled four dozen of tomatoes out of their own garden, and fresh veg. coming in every day – we could do with a bit of that here, couldn’t we?’

‘Is that all the family you’ve got?’

Ivy nodded.

‘Gran and my Auntie Flo – that’s the lot. And Aunt Flo, she’s in the A.T.S. – got one of those new caps they wear too – red and green on them – ever so smart they are. She wanted me to join up too, but I didn’t pass my medical. That’s on account of the accident I had when I was a kid on the halls.’

‘What halls?’

Ivy giggled.

‘Music halls, miss – V’riety – me and me sister Glad. Boneless Wonders we was – acrobats, you know. But there was a naccident on the high wire and Glad was killed, and they said I wouldn’t never be any good for it again, so I went out to service, and seems like I’ll have to stay in it. Doctor said I couldn’t pass me nohow.’

Meade said, ‘I’m sorry,’ in her pretty, soft voice. And then, ‘Get off early to bed, Ivy, and have good rest. Mrs Underwood won’t be wanting anything.’

Ivy jerked again.

‘I’m not all that set on bed – seems like it don’t do me any good. I get dreaming, you know about Glad and me, and having to walk that wire. That’s how I come to walk in my sleep when I w

down in Sussex, and Gran said it wasn't respectable and I'd better take and go in a flat where I couldn't get out.'

Meade shivered, and then wondered why. It certainly wouldn't be easy to get out of Vandeleur House after Bell had locked up. Horrid to think of wandering up and down that circular stair in the dead of night. She said quickly,

'You don't walk in your sleep now?'

Ivy's glance slipped away.

'Oh, I dunno,' she said in a vague voice. 'Aren't you going to have another fish cake? I made them the way Gran told me, and they come out lovely – tomato sauce and the least little bit of shrimp paste. Makes all the difference, don't it?'

When the tray was gone and the room was quiet again, Meade took a book and tried to read, but what the book was, or what the lines of print had to say, she never had any idea. There was a shade lamp beside the bed. The light fell mellow across her shoulder, and across Mabel Underwood's pink sheets and the corner of a pink frilled pillow-case. This had been Godfrey Underwood's room, that was why there was a telephone by the bed. Uncle Godfrey and a pink frilled pillow-case – nothing could be more incongruous. But he wouldn't notice anything like that. The eiderdown bloomed with pink and purple paeonies, and so did the curtains. There was rose-coloured china on the washstand and a rose-coloured carpet on the floor. There had been times when she felt that she couldn't bear it for another moment, but it was like everything else, you got used to it.

The telephone bell cut across her drifting thoughts. Under them she had been listening for it, straining for it, expecting it. Now that it had come, her heart knocked wildly at her side and her hands shook. Giles' voice said from a long way off,

'Hullo! Is that you?'

She said, 'Yes.'

'It doesn't sound like you.'

She caught her breath.

'How do you know what I sound like?'

At the other end of the line Giles frowned. How did he know? The answer to that was that he did. He said so.

There was no answer.

'Meade – are you there? Please don't ring off – I've got a lot to talk about. I think it's easier on the telephone – I mean we want to get the ground cleared a bit, don't we? You won't go away?'

'No, I won't go away.'

'Where are you? Are you alone – can you talk?'

'Yes. My aunt has gone out. I'm in bed.'

'Why? What's the matter?'

'Oh, nothing. I'm just tired.'

'You're not too tired to talk?'

'No.'

'All right, then, here goes. I've been thinking, and I want to know where we left off. It seems to me I've got to know that. Don't you see you've got to help me out? If I'd come back blind, you'd lend me your eyes to see with – read my letters for me, all that sort of thing – wouldn't you? Well, this is just the same, isn't it? I've gone blind, not in my eyes but in my memory. The things I can't remember are like a letter that I can't read. If I ask you to read it for me, you're not going to say no, are you?'

'What do you want me to tell you?'

'I want to know how we stood to each other. We were friends, weren't we?'

'Oh, yes.'

‘Anything more? That’s what I really want to know. Was I in love with you?’

‘You said so.’

‘Then I meant it. I wouldn’t have said it if I hadn’t. What did you say?’

There was no answer. Her heart beat and her breath came quick, but there weren’t any words.

‘Meade – don’t you see you’ve got to help me? I’ve got to know. Were we engaged?’

There was still no answer.

He said in an insistent voice,

‘Why, I’ve *got* to know – you must see that. Were we engaged? Was it given out?’

She wanted to laugh and she wanted to cry. It was so very much Giles – so dearly familiar – the urgency of his voice, the way he said her name, the way he never could wait if there was anything he wanted. Echoes out of the past: ‘Meade, I must know’ – the same insistent ring. Then it had been, ‘Care you care for me?’ Now it was, ‘Did I care for you?’ She said as quickly as she could,

‘No, it wasn’t given out.’

There was a silence so utter and so prolonged that her heart contracted with fear. Suppose he had gone – hung up and gone away. Quite easy to do. Perhaps that was what he had done – hung up and gone away out of her life. She found herself quick and hot to deny it. That wouldn’t be Giles. He always said what he thought. He would tell her straight out – ‘I’m sorry. I can’t remember. It’s a wash-out.’ He wouldn’t slink away like a thief in the night.

His voice came over the wire, strong and full.

‘Well, that’s that. We’ve got it over. I didn’t want to spoil our lunch tomorrow. You will lunch with me, won’t you?’

Meade said faintly,

‘I pack parcels from two to five—’

‘*Parcels?*’

‘For the bombed – clothes and things.’

‘But you could get an afternoon off, couldn’t you, if you tried very hard?’

‘It wouldn’t be smiled on.’

‘I shouldn’t worry about that. After all, I don’t come back from the dead every day.’

He heard her catch her breath.

‘That’s hitting below the belt.’

‘I always do. You’ll come?’

‘Oh, yes, I’ll come. Where?’

‘I’ll be round to fetch you at a quarter to one. Go to sleep and dream about nice things. Good night.’

She went to sleep, and did not dream about anything. For the first time since that June night she slept and did not dream at all. Everything in her relaxed and fell into rest. The effort of the will, the strain of endurance, the hurrying memories, thought which would not be controlled, all went from her. She slept without consciousness or movement until Ivy came in to draw the curtains.

SIX

AFTER THIS, BREAKFAST was not as bad as it might have been. Mrs Underwood, in pyjamas and a pink satin dressing-gown, discoursed volubly upon last night's bridge.

'They had that Miss Roland from the top floor for a fourth – Carola Roland. Plays quite a good game, but if she wasn't born Carrie Snooks or something like that, I'm very much mistaken. And she isn't as young as she looks either – not when you see her close to. Of course Mrs Willard's got no young people to consider, and I'll say that for Mr Willard, faddy and tiresome he may be, but there are worse things in a husband than that, and he isn't the sort that runs after blondes, though really you can't be sure about anyone. There was that Willie Tidmarsh that was some sort of cousin of Godfrey's and I must say I did think his wife bullied him but they were a very devoted couple – one of those finicky little men, always getting up to open the door for you, and taking the temperature of the bath water, and putting new washers in the taps – got on my nerves. And, as I say, Bella did nag him, but you'd have thought after twenty-five years he'd have been used to it. And he went off with the barmaid from the Bull, and I believe they were running a snack bar somewhere down in the west.' Mrs Underwood paused to pour herself out another cup of coffee.

Meade asked, 'What is Carola Roland like to talk to? She's awfully pretty.'

All at once the hand with the coffee-pot shook. Some of the coffee went into the saucer. Mrs Underwood made a vexed sound.

'Pretty! She's made up till you don't know what she's like underneath! And what do you think she was wearing last night? Black satin trousers, a green and gold top, and emerald earrings about half a yard long. If it was done for Alfred Willard's benefit, she had her trouble for nothing – and as for Mrs Willard and me, she won't do either of us any harm.' She put down her cup rather abruptly.

Meade said, 'What's the matter?'

The flow of words had broken so suddenly. Mabel Underwood had such a curious faltering look. She repeated her last words in a fumbling sort of way.

'She won't – do either of us – any harm. Was that what I said just now?' Her eyes stared and she blinked. And then before Meade could answer she caught herself up. 'Of course it was – I can't think what came over me – everything seemed to go. But what I was going to say was, it's all very well for Mrs Willard and me, and you can't just sit at home doing nothing all through the black-out, so a fourth for bridge is a fourth for bridge, and it's a pity you don't play, but there it is. But it's quite different for a girl, and your uncle wouldn't like you to go mixing yourself up with this Carola Roland – not at all. You can say good-morning and pass the time of day in the lift, but that'll be quite enough. I don't want Godfrey telling me I oughtn't to have let you get mixed up with her.'

There was some more on these lines, and then Meade managed to intimate that she was going out to lunch with Giles. Her heightened colour provoked an embarrassing flood of kindness.

'There – what did I tell you! It'll all come right – see if it doesn't. And as for the parcels, I'll get them and do them myself, and then that stuck-up Miss Middleton won't have a word to say. One pair of hands is as good as another, and she won't have anything to look down her long nose about. Goes on as if she'd a vinegar bottle under it and was trying not to sneeze. I couldn't do with her for long, but I can put in an afternoon or two to let you off. And mind you put on something pretty, for I'm sick to death of seeing you in grey, and no need of it now he's come back.'

Meade's lips trembled into a smile. No need to wear mourning for Giles, because Giles was alive. She went down into the luggage-room to get out coloured things that she had packed away. There was a suit she had had in the spring – skirt and jumper of green and grey wool, and a green coat. It might

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