

Title

Miss Silver Series

THE KEY

By
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About this eBook

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The Key

1

There are traffic lights in the middle of Marbury where its two main roads cross. Michael Harsch came up to the edge of the pavement and saw the orange light go on. Having lived the greater part of his life under German rule, he made no attempt to cross before the red, but stood waiting patiently just where he was until the lights should change.

Of the two roads, one runs as straight as a ruled line, set with pompous examples of Victorian shop architecture. The other comes sidling in on a crooked curve and shows an odd medley of houses, shops, offices, with a church and a filling-station to break the line. Some of the houses were there when the Armada broke. Some of them have put on new pretentious fronts. Some of them are no better than they should be from a cheap builder's estimate. Taken as a whole, Ramford Street has a certain charm and individuality which the High Street lacks.

Michael Harsch, waiting for the lights, looked idly down the irregular line of houses - a tall, narrow one running up to four stories with a dormer window in the roof; the square front of a shabby hotel with its sign of the Ram swinging tarnished just over the heads of the passers-by; farther on a little squat, two-storied house with its old woodwork painted emerald green, and over the door in gold letters two foot high, the word Teas.

He turned back to the traffic lights, and found them green too. If he had crossed then, a great many things might have happened differently. Yet the moment came and went without anything to mark it out from other moments. His mind was divided between the purpose which had brought him to the crossing and the realization that he was tired and thirsty, and that a cup of tea would be pleasant. If he crossed now, he would get the four-forty-five to Perry's Halt and catch the bus to Bourne. If he waited to have some tea, he would miss his train and the bus, and be late for supper, because he would have to walk across the fields from the Halt. He hesitated, and as he did so the lights changed again. He turned his back on the crossing and made his way down Ramford Street.

He had without knowing it taken the most momentous decision of his life. Because green changed to orange at just that time three people were to die, and the lives of four others were to be deeply and radically altered. Yet there was nothing in his mind to warn him of this. And perhaps - who knows? - a warning would have made no difference.

He went a little way down the street and crossed over. Here again there was a decision to be made, but this time it hardly cost him a thought. The little green tea-shop had put the idea of tea into his mind, but it had no attractions for him. He went up three steps, crossed a tessellated space, and entered the dark, narrow hall of the Ram. Nothing more inconvenient could have been devised. There was a staircase, there was a booking-office. There were two barometers, three cases of stuffed fish, and the grinning mask of a fox. There was a grandfather clock with a gloomy face and a hollow tick, there was a marble-topped table like

a wash-stand with gilt legs which supported a pining aspidistra in a bright pink pot. There was an enormous umbrella-stand, and a small oak chest. There was no light, and a smaller amount of fresh air than one would have believed possible. A smell of beer, damp mackintoshes, and mould appeared to be indigenous. It had a bouquet and a richness not to be attained in less than fifty years.

There were six doors. Above one of them were the words Coffee Room. As Harsch approached, this door opened and a man came out. The room was lighter than the hall. The light fell slanting past an ear, a cheekbone, a tweed-covered shoulder, and struck full upon the face of Michael Harsch. If the man who was coming out of the coffee-room checked, it was no more than anyone might have done to avoid colliding with a stranger. He certainly did not draw back, and before a breath could be taken he had gone past and was absorbed into the gloom.

Michael Harsch stood still. He thought he had seen a ghost, but he was not sure. You have to be very sure indeed before you speak about a thing like that. He had had a shock, and he was not sure. He stood looking into the room but not seeing it. Presently he turned and walked back into Ramford Street. When he got there he stood and looked about him, up the street and down. There was no one in sight whom he had ever seen before. Ghosts don't walk in the day. He told himself that he had been mistaken, or that his nerves had played him a trick. He had been overworking - it was a trick of the nerves, a trick of the light - light slanting like that plays tricks. There were too many things in his mind, in his memory, waiting for just such a chance to give them the illusion of a present instead of a past reality.

When he had satisfied himself that there was no one in sight he began to walk back towards the traffic lights. He had forgotten that he was tired and thirsty. He had forgotten why he had gone into the Ram. He thought only of getting away from Marbury, of catching his train. But he had lost too much time, when he reached the station the train was gone. He had an hour and a half to wait, and the long walk over the fields at the other end. Supper would be over before he got home. But Miss Madoc was so kind - she would see that something was kept hot for him. He filled his mind with these everyday trifles in order to steady it.

When he had crossed the road and was at a safe distance, a man in a tweed coat and a pair of grey flannel trousers came out of the little newspaper and tobacco shop next door to the Ram. He looked exactly like dozens of middle-aged men in country places. He went back into the hotel with an evening paper in his hand. To all whom it might concern he had just stepped out to buy it. He went back into the coffee-room and shut the door. The only other occupant looked over the top of a cheap picture paper and said,

"Did he recognize you?"

"I don't know. I think he did, but afterwards he wasn't sure. I went into the tobacconist's and watched him through the window. He looked up and down, and then, when he saw no one, he wasn't sure - I could see it in his face. He didn't see you, did he?"

"I don't think so - I had my paper up."

The man in the tweed coat said, "Wait a minute! When you get back you can find out what is in his mind about me. He's had a shock, he is doubtful, but you must find out what is the state of his mind when the shock has passed. If he is dangerous, steps must be taken at once. In any case it is very nearly time, but if it is possible without too much risk he should be allowed to complete his experiments. I leave it to you."

Michael Harsch sat on a bench at Marbury station and waited for his train. His mind felt bruised and incapable of thought. He was very tired.

2

Michael Harsch came out of the hut in which he had been working and stood looking down the tilted field to the house at Prior's End. Because the work on which he was engaged was dangerous, and there was always present the possibility that it might end itself and him quite suddenly in a puff of smoke, the house was nearly a quarter of a mile away. The hut was long and low, a shabby-looking affair roughly creosoted to withstand the weather, but the door through which he had come was a very solid one, and the line of windows not only carried bars but were secured inside by strong and heavy shutters.

He turned to lock the door behind him, pocketed the key, and then stood again as he had done before, looking out past the house to the lane which followed the slope, and the line of willows which marked the trickling course of the Bourne. The village of Bourne was out of sight, all except the top of the square church tower. On a fine day the weathercock glinted in the sun. But there was no sun to-night. Dark hurrying clouds overhead where a wind blew - high up, unfelt below. Strange to see the clouds drive when not a leaf was stirring in the hedgerow or among the willows.

Unseen forces driving men. The thought went through his mind, tinged, as his thoughts were apt to be tinged, with something deeper than melancholy, more austere than sarcasm. Forces driving men, unseen, unfelt, unguessed at, until the storm broke in darkness and shattering confusion.

He lifted his face to the sky and watched the driven clouds. A man of middle size, standing crookedly to save the leg which had been crippled in a concentration camp, the habitual stoop of his shoulders less noticeable now that he was looking up. His hair, rather long and still very black, was barred by a white lock which followed the line of a scar. His features had no markedly Jewish look. They were thin, and drawn so fine that it was only a second or a third glance which would probably decide that they had once been handsome. The eyes were beautiful still - brown, steadfast eyes which had looked on many things and found them good, and then had looked on other things and found them evil. They looked now upon the sky and upon those hurrying clouds, and all at once he straightened up, standing evenly upon his feet. For a moment ten years dropped away - he was a young man again. There was power in the world, and he had the key to it. He began to walk down the field to the house.

Janice Meade was in the little sitting-room which had been built on at the back, perhaps a hundred and twenty, perhaps a hundred and fifty years ago. It jutted out into the garden and had windows on three sides of it - casement windows, each with a cushioned window-seat. The rest of the house was very much older. Some part of it must have been standing before the old Priory had fallen or been battered into a heap of ruins. The house fetched its name from those far off days. It was, and always had been, Prior's End. The lane that served it served no other house, and ended there, just beyond the gate.

Michael Harsch came through the house, stooping his head where the low beam crossed a crooked passage, turned the handle of the sitting-room door, and came in with something of the air of a man who comes home. Janice was in the window-seat, curled up like a mouse, with a book held close to the glass to catch the light. She always reminded him of a mouse - a little brown thing with bright eyes. She jumped up as she saw him.

"Oh, Mr Harsch - I'll make you some tea."

He lay back in a long chair and watched her. All her movements were quick, light, and decided. The water was hot in the kettle; it needed very little to bring it to the boil again over the blue spreading flame of the spirit-lamp. He took a biscuit and sipped gratefully from a cup brewed just as he liked it, very strong, with plenty of milk. Glancing up, he saw that she was looking at him, her eyes bright with questions. She would not ask them in any other way - he knew that - but for the life of her she could not keep them out of her eyes. His answering

smile made a younger, happier man of him.

"Yes, it has gone well. That is what you want to know, is it not?" His voice was deep and pleasant, with a marked foreign accent. He reached forward to put down his cup. "It has gone so well, my dear, that I think my work is done."

"Oh, Mr Harsch!"

The smile was gone again. He nodded gravely.

"Yes, I think it is finished. I do not mean altogether of course. It is, I think, a good deal like bringing a child into the world. It is your child - you have made it - without you it would not be there at all. It is flesh of your flesh, or, like this child of mine, thought of your thought, and between its conception and its birth there may be many years. With my child, it is five years that it has been in my thought night and day, and all that time I have worked with all my might for this moment when I could say, 'Here is my work! It is fulfilled - it is perfect! Look at it!' When it is grown it will do the work which I have brought it into the world to do. Now it must have nurses. It must grow, and be strong. It must be schooled, and tutored." He reached his hand for his cup again and said, "The man from the War Office will come down to-morrow. When I have finished my tea I ring him up. I tell him, 'Well, Sir George, it is over. You can come down and see for yourself. You can bring your experts. They can see, they can test. I give you the formula, my notes of the process - I give you everything. You can take my harschite and put it to its work. My part is done.'"

Janice said quickly, "Does it make you sad to let it go - like that?"

He smiled at her again.

"A little, perhaps."

"Let me give you some more tea."

"You are very kind."

He watched her, with the kindness in his eyes, as she took his cup and filled it. She was wishing so much she could say something that would make him feel less sad. She hadn't got the words, she didn't know them - not the right ones - and it would be unbearable to blunder. She could only give him his tea. She didn't know that her thoughts spoke for her in eye and lip, rising colour, and eager hand.

He said, "You are very kind to me."

"Oh, no - "

"I think you are. It has made this time very pleasant." He paused, and added without any change in his voice, "My daughter would have been just about your age - perhaps a little older - I do not know - "

"I'm twenty-two."

"Yes - she would have been twenty-three. You are like her, you know. She was a little brown thing too - and she had a brave spirit." He looked up suddenly and directly. "You must not be so sorry, or I cannot talk about her, and to-night I have a great desire to talk. I do not know why, but it is so." He paused, and then went on again. "You know, when there has been what you may call a tragedy - when you have lost someone, not in the ordinary way of death but in some way that puts fear into the imagination - it becomes so difficult to talk about the one that you have lost. There is too much sympathy - it makes an awkwardness. You do not like to speak because your friend is afraid to listen. He does not know what to say, and there is nothing that he or anyone else can do. So in the end you do not speak any more at all. And that I find sometimes very lonely. To-night I have a great desire to speak."

Janice felt her eyes sting, but she kept them steady, and her voice too.

"You can always talk to me, Mr Harsch."

He nodded in a friendly way.

"It would be a happiness for me, because, you see, it is the happy things that I would like to speak about. She had a happy life, you know. There was her mother and I, and the young