

Title

Miss Silver Series
THE CASE IS CLOSED

By
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About this eBook

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The Case is Closed

Chapter One

Hilary Carew sat in the wrong train and thought bitterly about Henry. It was Henry's fault that she was in the wrong train—indisputably, incontrovertibly, and absolutely Henry's fault, because if she hadn't seen him stalking along the platform with that air, so peculiarly Henryish, of having bought it and being firmly determined to see that it behaved itself, she wouldn't have lost her nerve and bolted into the nearest carriage. The nearest carriage happened to be a third-class compartment in the train on her right. It was now perfectly obvious that she ought to have got into the train on the other side. Instead of being in the local train for Winsley Grove stopping every five minutes and eventually arriving at 20 Myrtle Terrace in time to have tea and rock cakes with Aunt Emmeline, she was in a corridor train which was going faster every minute and didn't seem to have any intention of stopping for hours.

Hilary stared out of the window and saw Henry's face there. It was a horrible wet, foggy afternoon. Henry glared back at her out of the fog. No, glared wasn't the right word, because you don't glare unless you've lost your temper, and Henry didn't lose his temper, he only looked at you as if you were a crawling black beetle or a frightfully naughty small child. It was more effective than losing your temper of course, only you couldn't do it unless you were made that way. Hilary's own temper was the sort that kicks up its heels and bolts joyously into the heart of the fray. She sizzled with rage when she remembered the Row—the great Breaking-off-of-the-Engagement Row—and Henry's atrocious calm. He had looked at her exactly as he had looked at the station just now. Superior, that was what Henry was—damned superior. If he had asked her not to go hiking with Basil, she might have given way, but to tell her she wasn't to go, and on the top of that to inform her that Basil was this, that, and the other, all of which was none of Henry's business, had naturally made her boil right over.

The really enraging part was that Henry had proved to be right—after the Row, and when she had begun to hike with Basil and hadn't got very far. Only by that time she had told Henry exactly what she thought about him and his proprietary airs, and had finished up by throwing his engagement ring at him—very hard.

If he had lost his temper even then, they might have made it up, flashed into understanding, melted again into tenderness. But he had been calm—calm when she was breaking their engagement! A ribald rhyme bobbed up in Hilary's mind. She had a private imp who was always ready with irreverent doggerel at what ought to have been solemn moments. He had got her into dreadful trouble when she was six years old with a verse about Aunt Arabella, now deceased:

“Aunt Arabella has a very long nose.

Nobody knows

Why it grows

So long and so sharp and as red as a rose.”

She hadn't ever been very fond of Aunt Arabella, and after the rhyme Aunt Arabella had never been very fond of her.

The imp now produced the following gem:

“If Henry could only get in a rage,
We shouldn’t have had to disengage.”

This was most sadly true.

The disengagement was now a whole month old.

It is very difficult to go on being angry for a whole month. Hilary could get angry with the greatest of ease, but she couldn’t stay angry, not for very long. About half way through the month she had begun to feel that it was about time Henry wrote and apologized. In the third week she had taken to watching for the post. For the last few days the cold and dreadful prospect of a future devoid of rows with Henry had begun to weigh upon her a good deal. It was therefore very heartening to be able to feel angry again.

And then imagination played her one of its really low tricks. Henry’s eyes looking back at her out of the fog, looking back at her out of her own mind, ceased to look scornfully, ceased to look haughtily into hers. They changed, they smiled, they looked at her with love—“And they won’t again ever—not ever any more. Oh, Henry!” It was just as if someone had suddenly jabbed a knife into her. It hurt just like that. One moment there she was, quite comfortably angry with Henry, and the next all stabbed and defenceless, with the anger running away and a horrid cold sinking feeling inside her. The back of her eyes stung sharply—“If you think you’re going to cry in a public railway carriage——”

She blinked hard and turned back from the window. Better not look out any more. The mist played tricks—made you feel as if you were alone, made you think about things that you simply were not going to think about, and all the time instead of being such a mutt, what you’d got to do was to find out where the blighted train was going and when it was likely to stop.

There had been two other people in the carriage when she got in. They were occupying the inside corner seats, and they had made no more impression on her than if they had been two suit-cases. Now, as she turned round, she saw that one of them, a man, had pushed back the sliding door and was going out into the corridor. He passed along it and out of sight, and almost immediately the woman who had been sitting opposite him moved in her seat and leaned a little forward, looking hard at Hilary. She was an elderly woman, and Hilary thought she looked very ill. She had on a black felt hat and a grey coat with a black fur collar—the neat inconspicuous clothes of a respectable woman who has stopped bothering about her appearance but is tidy from habit and training. Under the dark brim her hair, face, and eyes were of a uniform greyish tint.

Hilary said, “I’ve got into the wrong train. It sounds awfully stupid, but if you could tell me where we’re going—I don’t even know that.”

A curious little catch came up in the woman’s throat. She put up her hand to the collar of her coat and pulled at it.

“Ledlington,” she said. “First stop Ledlington.” And then, with the catch breaking her voice, “Oh miss, I knew you at once. Thank God he didn’t! And he’ll be back any minute—he’d never have gone—not if he’d recognized you. Oh, miss!”

Hilary felt something between pity and repulsion. She had never seen the woman before. Or had she? She didn’t know. She began to think she had, but she didn’t know where. No, it was nonsense—she didn’t know her, and the poor creature must be mad. She began to wish that the man would come back, because if the woman was really mad she was between her and the corridor——

“I’m afraid,” she began in a little polite voice, and at once the woman interrupted her, leaning right forward.

“Oh, miss, you don’t know me—I saw that the way you looked at me. But I knew you directly you got in, and I’ve been hoping and praying I’d get the chance to speak to you.”

Her black gloved hands were gripping one another, the kid stretched across the knuckles, the finger ends sticking out because they were too long. The fingers inside them twisted, plucked, and strained. Hilary watched them with a sort of horror. It was like watching something twisting with pain.

She said, "Please——"

The woman's voice went on, urgent, toneless, with the catch, not quite a cough, breaking it.

"I saw you in the court when the trial was on. You come in with Mrs. Grey, and I asked who you was, and they told me you was her cousin Miss Carew, and then I minded I'd heard speak of you—Miss Hilary Carew."

The fear went out of Hilary and a cold anger stiffened her. As if it wasn't enough to live through a nightmare like Geoffrey Grey's trial, this woman, one of the horrible morbid crowd who had flocked to watch his torture and Marion's agony—this damned woman, because she had recognized her, thought she had an opportunity to pry, and poke, and ask questions. How dare she?

She didn't know how white she had turned, or how her eyes blazed, but the woman unlocked those twisting hands and held them up as if to ward a blow.

"Oh, miss—don't! Oh, for God's sake don't look at me like that!"

Hilary got up. She would have to find another carriage. If the woman wasn't mad, she was hysterical. She didn't much like the idea of passing her, but anything was better than having a scene.

As she put her hand on the sliding door, the woman caught at the skirt of her coat and held it.

"Oh, miss, it was Mrs. Grey I wanted to ask about. I thought you'd know."

Hilary looked down at her. The light colourless eyes stared back straining. The hand on her coat shook so that she could feel it. She wanted most dreadfully to get away. But this was something more than curiosity. Though she was only twenty-two, she knew what people looked like when they were in trouble—Geoffrey Grey's trial had taught her that. This woman was in trouble. She let her hand drop from the door and said,

"What do you want to know about Mrs. Grey?"

At once the woman released her and sat back. She made a great effort and contrived a calmer, more conventional tone.

"It was just to know how she is—how she's keeping. It's not curiosity, miss. She'd remember me, and I've thought about her—oh, my God, many's the time I've waked in the night and thought about her!"

The moment of self-control was over. With a shuddering sob she leaned forward again.

"Oh, miss—if you only knew!"

Hilary sat down. If the poor thing wanted news of Marion, she must have it. She looked frightfully ill. There was no doubt that the distress was real. She said in her kindest voice,

"I'm sorry I was angry. I thought you were just one of the people who came to look on, but if you knew Marion, that's different. She—she's awfully brave."

"It's haunted me the way she looked—it has, indeed, miss. The last day I didn't know how to bear it—I didn't indeed. And I tried to see her. Miss, if I never spoke another word, it's true as I tried to see her. I give him the slip and I got out and round to where she was staying, and they wouldn't let me in—said she wasn't seeing anyone—said she was resting——" She broke off suddenly with her mouth half open and stayed like that, not seeming to breathe for a dragging moment. Then, in a whisper, hardly moving her lips, "If she'd ha' seen me——" She fixed her light wild eyes on Hilary and said, her tone quickened with horror, "She didn't see me. Resting—that's what they told me. And then he come, and I never got another chance—he saw to that."

Hilary made nothing of this, but it left her with the feeling that she ought to be able to make something of it. She spoke again in the same kind voice as before.

“Will you tell me your name? Mrs. Grey will like to know that you were asking after her.”

The woman put one of the black gloved hands to her head.

“I forgot you didn’t know me. I’ve let myself run on. I shouldn’t have done it, but when I see you it come over me. I always liked Mrs. Grey, and I’ve wanted to know all the year how she was, and about the baby. It’s all right, isn’t it?”

Hilary shook her head. Poor Marion—and the baby that never breathed at all.

“No,” she said—“she lost the baby. It came too soon and she lost it.”

The black hands took hold of one another again.

“I didn’t know. There wasn’t no one I could ask.”

“You haven’t told me your name.”

“No,” she said, and drew a quick gasping breath.

“Oh, he’ll be coming back in a minute! Oh, miss—Mr. Geoffrey—if you could tell me if there’s any news——”

“He’s well,” said Hilary. “He writes when he’s allowed to. She’s gone to see him to-day. I shall hear when I get back.”

As she spoke, she had stopped seeing the woman or remembering her. Her eyes dazzled and her heart was so full of trouble that there was no room for anything else. Geoff in prison for life—Marion struggling through one of those terrible visits which took every ounce of strength and courage out of her.... She couldn’t bear it. Geoff who had been so terribly full of life, and Marion who loved him and had to go on living in a world which believed he was a murderer and had shut him up out of harm’s way.... What was the good of saying “I can’t bear it,” when it was going on, and must go on, and you had to bear it, whether you wanted to or not?

A man came down the corridor and pushed at the sliding door. Hilary got up, and he stood aside to let her pass. She went as far down the corridor as she could and stood there looking out at the trees and fields and hedges going by in the mist.

Chapter Two

“You look dreadfully tired,” said Hilary.

“Do I?” said Marion Grey indifferently.

“You do—and cold. And the soup’s good—it truly is. It was all jelly till I hotted it, but if you don’t drink it quickly it won’t stay hot, and lukewarm things are frightful.” Hilary’s voice was softly urgent.

Marion shivered, took a mouthful or two of the soup, and then put down the spoon. It was as if she had roused from her thoughts for a moment and then sunk back into them again. She was still in her outdoor things—the brown tweed coat which she had had in her trousseau, and the brown wool beret which Aunt Emmeline had crocheted for her. The coat was getting very shabby now, but anything that Marion wore took the lines of her long graceful body. She was much, much too thin, but if she walked about in her bones she would still be graceful. With her dark hair damp from the fog, the beret pushed back, the grey eyes fixed in a daze of grief and fatigue, she had still the distinction which heightens beauty and survives it.

“Finish it, darling,” said Hilary.

Marion took a little more of the soup. It warmed her. She finished it and leaned back. Hilary was a kind child—kind to have a fire waiting for her—and hot soup—and scrambled eggs. She ate the eggs because you have to eat, and because Hilary was kind and would be unhappy if she didn’t.