

Title

Miss Silver Series

THE CATHERINE-WHEEL

**By
Patricia Wentworth**

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About this eBook

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To those readers ...

who have so kindly concerned themselves about Miss Silver's health. Her occasional slight cough is merely a means of self-expression. It does not indicate any bronchial affection. She enjoys excellent health.

P. W.

The Catherine-Wheel

Chapter 1

Jane Heron took a few graceful gliding steps and came slowly back round the circle of watching women. Clarissa Harlowe's dress show was in progress, and she was showing a dress called Sigh no More. There was not very much of it above the waist, just a few opalescent folds, but the skirt was new and rather exciting. There were almost more yards of stuff in it than you would have believed possible, all coming in slim and tight to the waist, but they would swirl like spray in the wind when you danced. Jane lifted her arms in a movement which she contrived to make perfectly natural and took a few floating waltz steps. The skirt flew out. A woman close to her drew in her breath with a gasp. Another said, 'Heavenly! But I mustn't—I really mustn't.' Mrs. Levington raised her rather harsh voice and called across the room to Mrs. Harlowe, 'I'll have it—but you mustn't sell a copy for three months.' She turned as soon as she had spoken and beckoned to Jane.

'Come here! I want to see how it fastens.'

Jane came with the graceful submissive air which was part of the job. Inwardly she was thinking that Mrs. Levington wouldn't get into the dress by at the very least four inches. She wasn't fat, but she was solid—rather high in the shoulder, rather square in the hip. Handsome, of course, if you liked them that way. Jane didn't.

It wasn't her business to mind who bought Clarissa Harlowe's dresses—they were out of her reach, and always would be. She was there because her really lovely figure added at least twenty-five per cent to the price.

Mrs. Harlowe came up, brisk, businesslike, smartly tailored.

'That will be quite all right, Mrs. Levington. You can have a fitting tomorrow at ten-thirty. No, I'm afraid I can't make it any other time—we are very busy.'

Indifference bordering on rudeness, that was her line—'Take it or leave it—we can do better than you.' It was astonishing how it went down. It went down with Mrs. Levington

now. She accepted her appointment quite meekly. Jane was dismissed.

The dressing-room was full of clothes and girls. One of them went out as Jane came in, a lovely blonde in a thin black afternoon dress made incredibly distinguished by its cut and some clever skirt drapery. Jane took off *Sigh no More* and hung it up carefully. She had a feeling that she would never look so nice in anything again. It was only her figure that was beautiful. Her face was too small, too colourless. When she looked in the glass she would see a pair of good grey eyes and quite a lot of dark hair, and that was about all you could say for Jane Heron apart from her figure. No one had any fault to find with that. It was slim without being thin. Everything about it was just right. Jane thought a lot of it, and well she might, since it provided her with the roof over her head and her daily bread and butter. It was a good biddable figure, too, not the sort you had to pander to and placate. She knew girls who went in daily fear of their hip measurement, and who simply didn't dare to look at a potato or a pat of butter. There was no nonsense like that about Jane's figure. If she ate chocolate and suet pudding for a year she wouldn't put on an ounce. Jeremy had given her a box of chocolates last week.

She turned round from hanging up *Sigh no More* and began to put on her own clothes. The show was nearly over—she wouldn't have to go through again. She slipped into a dark skirt, pulled a jumper over her head, and put on her coat. Everyone was trying to dress at once. She had to stand on one leg at a time to change the shoes she had worn for her own dark ones. All the girls were dressing now, chattering nineteen to the dozen. She managed to get the glass for a moment while she pulled on the small dark turban which went with her suit, and there she was—Cinderella after the last stroke of twelve—no features, no bloom, no colour, except for the lipstick which brightened her mouth. It was too bright really, but you had to make up a bit extra for a show. Jeremy would look sideways and say things about pillar-boxes. Well, let him—she didn't care.

She came out on to the street and found it icy cold. It was going to freeze quite hard. She exchanged good-nights with Gloria and Daphne and took her way to the end of the street. Sometimes Jeremy met her there, but he wouldn't tonight because of the show. There just wasn't any saying how long it would go on.

She turned the corner, and he loomed up out of a doorway. It was heartening when you had been feeling like Cinderella. He slipped his hand inside her arm, and she said, 'Oh, you shouldn't have come!'

Jeremy Taverner said, 'Don't be silly! How did it go?'

'Two of my things sold. That puts my stock up.'

'The usual frightful women?'

'They're not all frightful.'

'I don't know how you stand it.'

'Well, I don't see there's anything else I could do which I shouldn't hate a good deal worse.'

'As?'

'Serving in a shop—nursemaid—companion—'

'There are lots of jobs for women.'

'Darling, I'm not trained for any of them.'

He said in an angry voice, 'Don't call me darling!'

'Did I?'

'You did. I don't like it.'

She laughed easily.

'It doesn't mean anything—one does it all the time. It just slipped out.'

He said still more angrily, 'That's why!'

The hand inside her arm gripped her quite painfully. She said, 'Darling, you're pinching

me!’ Then, with a sudden change of voice and manner, ‘Don’t be a tiresome toad, because I want to talk to you—I really do.’

In spite of being called a tiresome toad in the sort of voice which makes an intimate and flattering term of it, Jeremy remained angry.

‘I don’t see why you weren’t trained for anything. Girls ought to be.’

‘Yes, darling, but I wasn’t. My mother married a more or less penniless parson with his head in the clouds, and they never thought about it. They never had any time to think about anything, because the parish was much too big and poor. And they died when I was fifteen, and my grandfather took me in and sent me to the sort of school where they concentrate on your manners and don’t bother about sordid things like earning your living.’

‘Which grandfather?’ said Jeremy in a different voice.

‘Oh, the Taverner one—mother’s father—your grandfather’s brother—old Jeremiah Taverner’s eighth child and sixth son. I know the whole lot off by heart. The eldest was Jeremiah after his father, and then there were Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Acts, and the two girls, Mary and Joanna. Your grandfather was John, and mine was Acts. And if we hadn’t met by accident six months ago at the dullest party on earth we shouldn’t have known we existed. I mean you wouldn’t have known I did, and I wouldn’t have known you did.’ She came up close, so that her shoulder rubbed against his arm. ‘You know, the other six probably all left descendants too, and I expect most of them will have seen the Advertisement and answered it. I do wonder what they’re like—don’t you?’

Jeremy said, ‘It must have been a whale of a family row.’

‘Oh, I don’t know—people drift away—’

‘Not to that extent. My grandfather used to talk about his twin, Joanna, but I don’t think he ever saw her. He was clever, you know—took scholarships, and got into one of these research laboratories. That’s how my father came to be a doctor. He was killed in nineteen-eighteen. My mother married again and went to Australia, leaving me with the old boy. So we were both brought up by our grandfathers—Hi! There’s your bus!’

They ran for it, and managed to scramble on, but it wasn’t possible to go on talking. Jane was lucky, because the bus passed the end of her road. When they got off they had only to cross the street and go about a third of the way along Milton Crescent to No. 20.

She let herself in with her key and took Jeremy up three flights of stairs to the attic floor. There were two attics which had once been maids’ bedrooms, and there was a boxroom and a bathroom. Jane had both the attics, and alluded to them as ‘my flat’. The back one was the sitting-room. With the light switched on and the curtains drawn it always gave her a thrill, because it wasn’t in the least what you would expect. There was an old walnut bureau, and two Queen Anne chairs with seats of Chinese brocade. A walnut mirror surmounted by a golden eagle hung above the bureau. There was a very good Persian rug, and a comfortable sofa heaped with many-coloured cushions. The oddly named Mr. Acts Taverner had, in fact, started life as a purveyor of second-hand furniture and finished up by achieving the kind of antique shop which provides its owner with a good deal of pleasure without bringing in a great deal of cash. Jane’s furniture was what she had been able to salvage from the sale.

‘Now,’ she said, turning round from the window. ‘Put on the kettle, there’s an angel—I’m dying for a cup of tea. And then I’ll show you what I got this morning.’

Jeremy put a match to the gas ring and stood up.

‘I know what you got—an answer from Box three hundred and whatever it was, because I got one too. I brought it along to show you.’

They sat down side by side upon the sofa and each produced a sheet of rather shiny white paper. The notes were headed Box 3093. One began ‘Dear sir,’ and the other ‘Dear madam’. Jane’s ran:

‘Your answer to the advertisement inviting the descendants of Jeremiah Taverner who

died in 1888 to communicate with the above box number received and contents noted. Kindly inform me of the date of your grandfather Acts Taverner's decease, and state whether you remember him clearly, and to what extent you were brought into contact with him.'

Except for a variation in the name the two letters were identical. Jeremy and Jane gazed at them frowning. Jeremy said, 'I don't see what he's getting at.'

'Perhaps he's writing a family history.'

'Why should he?'

'I don't know—people do. Let's write our answers, then perhaps we'll find out.'

His frown deepened.

'Look here, you'd better let me write.'

'Jeremy, how dull!'

'I didn't want you to answer the advertisement.'

'I know—you said so.'

She jumped up and began to get out the tea-things—a dumpy Queen Anne teapot, two Worcester cups and saucers, one of them riveted, a dark blue lustre milk-jug, an engaging tea-caddy painted in pastoral scenes.

Jeremy said slowly, 'What does he want?'

'A family reunion, darling—all our cousins. Perhaps some of them will be rays of sunshine. You are not doing much in that line, you know, my sweet.'

He came over to her and stood there in a very up-in-the-air kind of way.

'I think you had much better drop it. I'll write if you like.'

Jane lifted her eyes. They held a definite sparkle.

'Perhaps you didn't hear me say, "How dull!"'

'Jane—'

'Well, I'm saying it again—dull, dull, dull—ditchwater dull.' Then she stepped back and tapped a warning foot. 'You wouldn't like me to lose my temper, would you?'

'I don't know—'

Dark lashes fell suddenly over the sparkling eyes. A little flush came up under the pale skin.

'I'm too tired.' Then, with a sudden change of manner, 'Oh, Jeremy, don't be a beast!'

Chapter 2

Jacob Taverner sat there, as thin as a monkey and with the same alert, malicious look. A good many different climates had tanned and dried his skin. He had kept his hair, and whether by luck or good management, it was not very grey. It wasn't dyed either. No hairdresser would have made himself responsible for its odd dried-grass appearance. His eyes behind the sparkle were hazel. For the rest, there wasn't a great deal of him. He had dropped an inch from his original five-foot-six. Arms and legs had a frail, spidery look. He wore the sort of old clothes which only a tramp or a millionaire would be seen dead in. He wasn't quite a millionaire, but he was getting on that way, and he was seeing his solicitor, Mr. John Taylor, about the disposition of his property. Not that he intended to die—by no means—but having managed to enjoy a great many different things in the course of his seventy years, he now intended to amuse himself with the always fascinating possibilities of will-making with a difference.

Mr. Taylor, who had known him for some forty-five years, knew better than to try and thwart this latest of many preoccupations. Sometimes he said, 'Certainly,' sometimes he said, 'I should advise you to think that over,' and sometimes he didn't say anything at all. When this happened, Jacob Taverner chuckled secretly and the malice in his eyes grew brighter. Silence meant disapproval, and when John Taylor disapproved of him he felt that he had

scored, because John Taylor represented middle-class respectability, and when it was possible to give middle-class respectability a brief electric jolt he always enjoyed doing it.

They sat with the office table between them and John Taylor wrote. A pleasantly rounded little man with everything very neat about him, including a head very shiny and bald with a tidy little fringe of iron-grey hair at the back.

Jacob Taverner sat back in his chair with his thumbs in his waistcoat pockets and laughed.

‘Do you know, I had fifty answers to my advertisement. Fifty!’ He gave a sort of crow. ‘A lot of dishonest people in the world, aren’t there?’

‘There might not be any dishonest intention—’

Jacob Taverner puffed out his cheeks, and then suddenly expelled the air in a sound like ‘Pho!’ Contempt for his solicitor’s opinion was indicated.

‘Taverner’s not all that common as a name, and when you tack Jeremiah on to it—well, I ask you! “Descendants of Jeremiah Taverner who died in 1888”—that’s what I put in my advertisement. I had fifty answers, and half of them were just trying it on.’

‘He might have had fifty descendants,’ said Mr. John Taylor.

‘He might have had a hundred, or two hundred, or three, but he didn’t have half of those who answered my advertisement. He had eight children—I’m not counting four that died in their cradles. My father Jeremiah was the eldest. The next five sons were Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, and Acts, and the two girls were Mary and Joanna. Mary came fourth between Mark and Luke, and Joanna was a twin with John. Well, there’s quite a lot of scope for descendants there. That’s what first put it into my head, you know. Old Jeremiah, he kept the Catherine-Wheel inn on the coast road to Ledlington, and his father before him. Up to their necks in the smuggling trade, they were, and made a pretty penny out of it. They used to land the cargoes and get them into Jeremiah’s cellars very clever.’ He chuckled. ‘I remember him, and that’s the way he used to talk about it—“We diddled them very clever”. Well, he died in eighty-eight and he left everything to my father, his eldest son Jeremiah.’ He screwed up his face in a monkey grimace. ‘Was there a family row! None of them ever spoke to him again or had any truck or dealings with him. He let the inn on a long lease, put the money in his pocket, and set up as a contractor. He made a pile, and I’ve made another—and because of the family quarrel I can’t make a decent family will without advertising for my kith and kin.’

Mr. John Taylor looked incredulous.

‘You don’t mean to tell me you don’t know anything at all about any of them!’

Jacob laughed his queer dry laugh.

‘Would you believe me?’

‘No, I should not.’

Jacob laughed his queer dry laugh.

‘You don’t have to. I know a thing or two here and there, as you might say. Some of them went up in the world, and some of them went down. Some of them died in their beds, and some of them didn’t. Some of them got killed in both wars. Between the little I knew and what was in the fifty letters, I’ve got them more or less sorted out. Now, to start with—my own generation don’t interest me, and they’re mostly gone. So far as my money is concerned you can wash them out. They’ve either made enough for themselves or they’ve got used to doing without. Anyway I’m not interested. It’s the next generation, old Jeremiah’s great-grandchildren, that I’ll be putting my money on, and this is what they boil down to. It’s not the whole of them—you’re to understand that. I’ve picked them over and I’ve sorted them out.’

‘Do you mean you’ve been interviewing them?’

‘No, I don’t. I didn’t want to be mixed up in it personally—not for the moment. As a matter of fact I’ve taken the liberty of using your name.’

‘Really, Jacob!’ Mr. Taylor looked decidedly annoyed.