

Title

Miss Silver Series

THE CLOCK STRIKES TWELVE

By
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About this eBook

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The Clock Strikes Twelve

Chapter I

Mr James Paradine leaned forward and took up the telephone receiver. Birleton had not yet adopted the dial system. He waited for the exchange to speak, and then asked for a personal call to Mr Elliot Wray at the Victoria Hotel, after which he remained in the same position, waiting for the call to come through. The table at which he sat was a large and handsome piece of furniture carried out in mahogany, with a crimson leather top. All the furniture in the room was large and handsome. There were nests of drawers, filing cabinets, and bookshelves. There were chairs and armchairs of the same family as the writing-table—the best leather, the best wood, the best workmanship. A very deep crimson carpet covered the floor. Heavy curtains of the same warm shade were drawn across the windows. Above the black marble mantelpiece hung a life-size portrait of the late Mrs Paradine, a fair, spacious lady in ruby velvet and diamonds—a great many diamonds. In spite of them she managed to give the impression of having been a kind, housewifely sort of person. Nothing in the room was new, nothing was shabby. Everything appeared to partake of the vigorous and dignified quality of Mr James Paradine himself. A massive gilt clock beneath the portrait gave out four chiming strokes and then struck the hour of seven. As the last stroke died, there was a crackling in the receiver, a girl's voice from the exchange said 'Your call', and immediately upon that Elliot Wray was heard to say 'Hullo!'

James Paradine said,

'That you, Wray? James Paradine speaking. I want to see you. Here. At once.'

'Well—sir——'

'There's no well about it. I want you to come out here at once. Something's happened.'

At the other end of the line Elliot Wray's heart turned over. He took a moment, and said,

'What?'

'I'll tell you when you get here.'

Another pause. Then Elliot, very controlled.

'Is anything wrong?'

In spite of the control there was something that made old James Paradine smile grimly as he said,

'Wrong enough. But it's business—nothing personal. Come right along.'

‘I’m dining with the Moffats, sir.’

‘You’ll have to cut it out. I’ll ring them and say I’m keeping you.’

Elliot Wray stood frowning with the receiver at his ear. James Paradine was Robert Moffat’s partner, head of the Paradine-Moffat Works. He wouldn’t make him break a dinner engagement, and a New Year’s dinner at that, unless the matter was urgent. He said, ‘All right, sir, I’ll come out.’

James Paradine said, ‘All right’, and hung up.

The River House was three miles out of Birleton—four miles from the hotel. Allowing for the black-out, it would take Elliot all of twenty minutes to get here.

He went over to the door and switched off the two brilliant ceiling lights, and then, crossing the dark room, passed between the heavy curtains. The curtains ran straight across in continuance of the wall, but behind them was a deep bay with windows to right and left and a glass door in the middle. Mr Paradine turned a key, opened the door, and stood upon the threshold looking out. Two shallow steps gave upon a wide terrace. The parapeted edge showed dark against the moonlit scene beyond and far below. The house stood on a height above the river from which it took its name. James Paradine looked down upon a silvered landscape which passed from low wooded hills on the right, through the river valley, to the dark clustering mass of Birleton on the left. The moon lighted it, almost full in a cloudless sky. Wray would make better time than the twenty minutes he had allowed him with all this brightness abroad. The edge of the terrace stood out as clear as day below the window, and beyond it the deep, steep drop to the water’s edge.

He stood there looking out, pleased with the view but not thinking about it—thinking of other things, thinking his own sardonic thoughts—pleased with them, savouring them. Presently he turned the watch on his wrist. He could read the dial easily enough—a quarter past seven. He parted the curtains again, came back through the room, and put on the lights.

Exactly three minutes later Elliot Wray walked in, his face set hard, his fair hair ruffled, and his eyes as cold as ice. He had come, but he was damned if he was going to stay one split second longer than he need. He had not known how much he would mind coming into the house until he got there. What difference did it make—New York or London, Birleton or Timbuctoo—it was all the same, wasn’t it? As far as he was concerned Phyllida was dead. He hadn’t known till he came into the River House how damnably her ghost could walk—all the way up the stair beside him, whispering.

He shut the door and came over to the far side of the writing-table, every bit of him taut with protest.

‘What is it, sir?’

James Paradine looked at him across the table, leaning back in his swivel chair with a hand upon either arm.

‘You’d better sit down,’ he said. ‘Those blue-prints have disappeared.’

Elliot’s two hands came down on the table flat. He leaned on them and said,

‘What?’

James Paradine nodded slightly.

‘They’ve gone,’ he said. ‘You’d really better sit down.’

Elliot took no notice of that.

‘How can they have gone?’ He straightened up and stepped back a pace. ‘I left them with you this afternoon.’

‘Precisely. Cadogan sent you up with them yesterday. Bob Moffat, Frank, and I had a session over them. After a further session you left them with me this afternoon at three o’clock, and at six-thirty I discovered that they were missing.’

‘But, sir——’

‘Just a moment. I think you will agree that your dinner engagement must go by the board. I have told Bob Moffat that I am keeping you on business. Now listen to me. Don’t worry too much. The prints are gone, but we shall get them back. This is a family matter, and I propose to deal with it in my own way. In order that I may do so I shall require you to stay here tonight. Your old room is ready for you.’

Elliot’s face set harder still.

‘No, sir—I can’t do that.’

‘You propose to go back to Cadogan and tell him that the prints have gone? I tell you I’m going to deal with it in my own way, and I can guarantee—yes, guarantee—that the prints will be back in our hands before the morning.’

The two pairs of eyes met, both bright, and hard, and angry. If there was a contest of wills, there was nothing to show which way it went.

Elliot spoke first.

‘You said it was a family matter. Will you explain that?’

‘I am about to do so. You handed me the prints at three-thirty in my office at the works. I left at a quarter past four. During that three-quarters of an hour the prints were inside an attaché case on my office table, and the room was never unoccupied. I myself left it three times. On the first occasion I was away for about five minutes. You will remember that I walked along the corridor with you, and that we met Brown, the works manager, who wanted a word with me. During that time my secretary, Albert Pearson, was in the office. When I got back I sent him to Bob Moffat with some figures which he had asked for. Shortly after that my stepson, Frank Ambrose, came in with my nephew, Mark Paradine. I was away for about a quarter of an hour whilst they were there. When I came back Frank had gone and Mark was just leaving. Lastly, my other nephew, Richard Paradine, looked in, and I asked him to stay whilst I went and washed my hands. He did so. When I came back I took the attaché case and drove out here. At half past six I opened the case and discovered that the blue-prints were missing. You asked why I said that this was a family affair. I am telling you that no one outside the family had any possible opportunity of taking those prints.’

Elliot moved abruptly.

‘Your secretary, Pearson?’ he said.

James Paradine’s fine black eyebrows rose.

‘You didn’t know that he was a cousin? A distant one, but kin is kin. No, it’s all in the family, and I propose to deal with it in the family. That is why I am including you.’

Elliot stiffened noticeably.

‘I’m afraid I can’t claim——’ he began, and was met with a curt,

‘That’s enough about that! Don’t ride your high horse with me! You’ll do as I say, and for the simple reason that we’ve got to get the prints back, and I suppose you don’t want a scandal any more than I do. As to punishment, you needn’t be afraid. It will be—adequate.’

There was a silence. Elliot stood there. It seemed to him that he had been standing there for a long time. He thought, ‘What’s behind all this—what is he up to—what does he know?’ He said,

‘Aren’t you rather jumping to conclusions, sir? After all, the case must have been here in the house for a couple of hours. Aren’t you rather pinning it on the family? What about the servants?’

James Paradine leaned back. He laid his hands together fingertip to fingertip and rested them upon his knee. He said in a quiet, ordinary tone,

‘I’m afraid not, my dear Elliot. You see, I know who took the prints.’

Chapter II

Grace Paradine came out of her room and stood hesitating for a moment with her hand on the knob of the door. It was a very white hand, and it wore a very fine ruby ring. The passage upon which she had emerged was lighted from end to end and thickly carpeted with an old-fashioned but most expensive carpet, a riot of crimson, cobalt, and green. Mr James Paradine liked his colours bright. The fashions of his youth admitted of no improvement. They had been there when he was a boy, and as far as he was concerned, there they would remain. If anything wore out, it must be replaced without any variation from this standard. His only concessions to modernity were of a practical nature. The house bristled with telephones, blazed with electric light, and was most comfortably warmed from a furnace in the basement.

Miss Paradine withdrew her hand and moved a step away from the door. Standing thus under the bright unshaded ceiling light, she appeared a fine, ample figure of a woman—not handsome, but sufficiently imposing in a black dinner-gown and a light fur wrap. There was a diamond star at her breast, and a pearl dog-collar with diamond slides about her throat. Her dark hair, which was scarcely touched with grey, swept in broad waves from a central parting to a graceful knot low down on her neck. Her hair and her hands had been her two beauties. In her late fifties they still served her well. For the rest, she had widely opened brown eyes and a full face with some effect of heaviness in repose. She was James Paradine's sister, and had kept his house for the twenty years which had elapsed since the death of his wife. As she looked back down the passage now her expression was one of frowning intensity. It was obvious that she was waiting and listening.

And then, with an almost startling suddenness her face changed. The frown, the tension, the heaviness were gone. A wide and charming smile took their place. She turned quite round and moved to meet the girl who was coming out of a room at the end of the passage. The girl came on slowly—slowly and without an answering smile. She was tall and pretty, a graceful creature with dark hair curling on her neck, and the very white skin and dark blue eyes which sometimes go with it. When the black lashes shadowed the blue as they were doing now the eyes themselves might very well have passed for black. It was only when they were widely opened or when they took a sudden upward glance that you could see how really blue they were—as blue as sapphires, as blue as deep-sea water. She was Grace Paradine's adopted daughter, Phyllida Wray, and she was twenty-three years old.

She came along the passage in a long white dress. She wore the string of pearls which had been her twenty-first birthday present—fine pearls, very carefully matched. They were her only ornament. The pretty hands were ringless. The nails had been lacquered to a bright holly-red.

Grace Paradine put a hand on her shoulder and turned her round.

'You look very nice, my darling. But you're pale——'

The black lashes flicked up and down again, the blue of the eyes showed bright. It was all too quick to be sure whether there was anger under the brightness. She said in a perfectly expressionless voice.

'Am I, Aunt Grace?'

Miss Paradine had that tender, charming smile.

'Why, yes, my darling—you are.' She laughed a little and let her hand slide caressingly down the bare arm to the scarlet fingertips. 'Just between ourselves, you know, I think you might have put a little less on here, and given yourself some roses for our New Year's party.'

'But Christmas roses are white.' Phyllida said the words in an odd, half laughing voice.

She began to walk towards the head of the stairs, Miss Paradine beside her. Phyllida had disengaged herself. They went down together with the width of the stair between them. Grace Paradine kept a hand on the heavy mahogany rail. She said,

‘It was terrible, their keeping you on duty over Christmas.’

‘I volunteered.’

Miss Paradine said nothing for a moment. Then she smiled.

‘Well, my darling, it’s lovely to have you now. How long can you stay?’

Phyllida said, ‘I don’t know.’

‘But——’

The girl stood still, threw her a look which might have meant appeal, and said in a hurry,

‘I can have a week if I like, but I don’t know that I want it. I think I’m better working.’ A note of rebellion came into her voice. ‘Don’t look like that—I didn’t say it to hurt you. It’s just—well, you know——’

Miss Paradine had stopped too. Her hand tightened on the banister. She was making an effort. She made it very successfully. Her voice was full of sympathy as she said,

‘I know. You mustn’t force yourself, but after all this is your home, Phyl. There’s something in that, isn’t there? He can’t spoil that or take it away from you. It was yours before he came, and it will be yours long after we have all forgotten him.’

Phyllida moved abruptly. Something in the words had pricked her and pricked her sharply. She said in a strained undertone,

‘I don’t want to talk about it. Please, Aunt Grace.’

Miss Paradine looked distressed.

‘My darling, no, of course not. How stupid of me. We won’t look back. It’s a New Year for us both, and you’re home for a holiday. Do you remember how we used to plan every moment of the holidays when you were a schoolgirl? They were never half long enough for all the things we wanted to do. Well, tonight of course it’s all family—Frank and Irene, and Brenda. They’ve made up the quarrel and she’s staying with them, but I don’t know how long it will last. Lydia is with them too.’ She laughed a little. ‘Prettier than ever and just as provoking. Then there’ll be Mark, and Dicky, and Albert Pearson. I don’t like ten very much for a table, but it can’t be helped.’

They were descending the stairs again. Phyllida said in a relieved voice,

‘What is Lydia doing?’

‘I really don’t know—she talks such a lot of nonsense. She’s somebody’s secretary, I believe. You had better ask her. I do hope she’ll be careful tonight. James never did like her very much, and nonsense is a thing he just doesn’t understand. I’ve put her as far away from him as possible, but she has such a carrying voice.’

They crossed the hall and came into the drawing-room, where two young men stood warming themselves before the fire. Both were Paradines, nephews of old James Paradine. They were cousins, not brothers, and they bore no resemblance either to one another or to their uncle. Mark, the elder, was thirty-five—a tall, dark man with strong features and an air of gloom. Dicky several years younger—slight, fair, with ingenuous blue eyes and an unflinching flow of good spirits.

Whilst Mark was shaking hands and greeting his aunt and Phyllida with the fewest possible words, Dicky was kissing them both and rattling off compliments, good wishes, and enquiries.

‘You’re a smash hit in that dress, Aunt Grace—isn’t she, Mark? I say—you’ve got ‘em all on too, haven’t you? The old diamond star well to the fore! Do you remember when you tied it on to the top of the Christmas tree and Phyl nearly cried herself into a fit because she wanted it for keeps?’

‘I didn’t!’

‘Oh, yes, you did. You were only three, so we won’t hold it up against you. You were awfully pretty then—wasn’t she, Aunt Grace—pretty enough to stick on the Christmas tree with the star?’

Grace Paradine stood there smiling with Dicky's arm at her waist. Praise of Phyllida was the incense of which she could never have enough.

Dicky burst out laughing.

'Pity she's gone off so—isn't it darling?'

And then the door opened and Lane announced Mr and Mrs Ambrose, Miss Ambrose, and Miss Pennington. They all came in together—Frank Ambrose big and fair, with a pale, heavy face; his pretty dark wife Irene, with her air of having dressed in a hurry; his sister Brenda, mannish, with thick cropped hair as fair as his and the same very light blue eyes. One of the very worst quarrels which periodically shook the Ambrose household had followed upon a suggestion by Irene and her sister Lydia Pennington that Brenda's appearance would be very much improved if she would darken her almost white eyelashes. Lydia had most obligingly proffered experienced help, but the whole affair had gone up in smoke.

Lydia's own lashes bore witness to her skill. Nature had made them as red as her hair, but she had no idea of sitting down under anything of that sort. Her grey-green eyes now sparkled jewel-bright between lashes as dark as Phyllida's own. For the rest, she was a little bit of a thing who always managed to look as if she were about to take part in a mannequin parade. The latest clothes, the latest shoes, the latest way of doing the hair, the latest and most startling lipstick and nail-polish—these were Lydia. She made talk wherever she went. Men dangled and pursued, but never quite caught up with her. Dick Paradine proposed to her every time she came to stay. She fluttered up to him now and deftly evaded a kiss.

'Hullo, Dicky! Hullo, Phyl! I believe you've grown. I must get higher heels on my shoes. You're such an immense family. Look at Mr Paradine, and Aunt Grace, and Frank, and you—and Mark! Miles up in the air, all of you—so remote!'

Dicky had an arm about her.

'Not me, darling. You mayn't have noticed it, but I'm quite nice and near.'

She leaned back, laughing up at him.

'I never do notice you—that's why I love you so passionately.' Then, with a turn of her head which brought it against Dicky's shoulder, she was looking up at Mark.

'Happy New Year, darling.'

He made no answer, only turned and pushed at the fire with his foot. A log crashed in, and a flurry of sparks went up.

'Snubbed!' said Lydia in a mournful tone. Then she disengaged herself and ran across to Miss Paradine. 'Will I do, Aunt Grace? Or is he going to be shocked as usual? I wanted to come in my new brocade trousers—gorgeous furniture stuff and no coupons—but Frank lectured me and Irene lectured me till my spirit was broken, so here I am all jeune fille in a skirt.'

'You look very nice, my dear,' said Grace Paradine. She smiled and added, 'You always do.'

The skirt cleared the floor and stood out rather stiff. It was of heavy cream satin, and there was nothing at all jeune fille about it. It was worn with a top of cream and gold brocade, high in the neck and long in the sleeve. The red hair was piled as high as it would go in an elaborate arrangement of puffs and curls.

Beside her her sister Irene looked dowdy and washed-out. She had been in the middle of telling Grace Paradine just how much cleverer her Jimmy was than any of the other children in his class at the kindergarten. As soon as Lydia turned away she resumed her narrative.

Lydia caught Phyllida by the arm and swung her round.

'Look at Irene in that old black rag! Isn't she an awful warning? If I ever begin to feel myself slipping I just take a good strong look at her and it does the trick. She's still pretty, but it won't go on—she's going down the domestic drain just as fast as ever she can. Come along over here and tell me all about everything. Golly—isn't this an awful room for me—my hair