

Title

# **The Fingerprint**

**By**

**Patricia Wentworth**

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## About this eBook

“The Fingerprint” by *Patricia Wentworth*

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## The Fingerprint

### Chapter One

Frank Abbott was pleasantly occupied in forgetting that he was a Detective Inspector. Certainly no one meeting him for the first time would have suspected him of having any connection with Scotland Yard or the inexorable processes of the law, though he might just possibly have been a barrister. He had, in fact, been intended for the Bar, but his father's sudden death had necessitated some occupation more likely to solve the immediate problem of food to eat and a roof over his head. With more relations than anyone in England—his paternal great-grandfather had married three times and done his duty by the nation to the extent of having some two dozen children—he had never lacked a social background. In the country he could stay in almost any county without having to incur an hotel bill, and in town he received a good many more invitations than he was able to accept. When he was younger his immediate superior Chief Inspector Lamb, always on the alert for symptoms of wind in the head, had composed a special homily on the subject of Social Dissipation and its Inevitable and Deteriorating Results, which he delivered so often that Frank could have picked it up at any given point and finished it for himself. Although not now so much in use as formerly, it was still liable to be dug out, re-furbished, and delivered with undiminished vigour.

Tonight, however, was a carefree occasion. His cousin Cicely Abbott and her husband Grant Hathaway were up in town and giving a party to celebrate the extremely lucrative sale, for export, of a young pedigree bull. The party was small, intimate, and amusing. It is also memorable for the fact that Anthony Hallam was present, and that he and Frank spent a good part of the evening picking up threads and bringing themselves up to date after a five years' interval during which they had neither met nor written to one another. Out of sight had perhaps been out of mind, but no sooner were they once more in sight and touch than the old liking was strong between them. Old friendships do not always endure as characters develop and circumstances change, but in this case each was secretly a little surprised to find how quickly the five years' gap was bridged. When Anthony urged him to come down to Field End, Frank could very easily have refused, but found that he had no desire to do so.

»It's old Jonathan Field's place. He's some sort of a cousin of my mother's. There's no wife, but he's got two nieces. They are giving a dance, and I've been asked to bring another man. They'll put us up. I suppose you get an occasional Saturday night and Sunday off?«

Frank nodded. If it hadn't been for Jonathan Field's name, he might have said, »No,« just like that. As it was, he said quickly,

»The Jonathan Fields—the fingerprint man?«

Regardless of grammar, Anthony Hallam said,

»That's him. Extraordinary hobby. He has the fingerprints of everyone who has ever stayed there—his version of a visitors' book. I asked him whether some of them didn't object, and he wagged a finger at me and said he would nourish the deepest suspicions of anyone who did.«

Frank said,

»That didn't exactly answer the question, did it?«

»Oh, he didn't want to answer it, but I asked Georgina—«

»And who is Georgina?«

Anthony laughed. The laugh had a warm, pleased sound.

»Wait and see! She's the niece who lives with him, Georgina Grey. I won't attempt to describe her.«

»Didn't you say there were two nieces?«

»Oh, the other one is a sort of cousin, not really a niece at all. Her name is Mirrie Field.

She's a recent introduction. Little bit of a thing, with eyelashes.«

It was at this point that Cicely came up and made a face at them.

»If you two think you are going to talk to each other instead of dancing—«

They both groaned. Frank said,

»He was describing the latest girl friend's eyelashes. I can't wait to see them!«

Cicely was still just a little brown thing, but she too had eyelashes, and when she was happy she had her points. She was certainly happy tonight. She caught Frank's hand.

»You can dance with me! And Anthony will be lucky if he gets Vivia Marsden. She's going to be a top star in ballet.«

Cicely herself was like a feather in the wind. Frank looked down at her with the affection which his cool elegance belied. The mirror-smooth fair hair, the eyes of a cold and icy blue, the features which he had inherited from his grandmother the formidable Lady Evelyn Abbott, combined to produce a somewhat daunting impression. But he had never daunted his cousin Cicely. Looking up as he looked down, she showed him the tip of a scarlet tongue and said,

»Isn't Grant clever to have got such a lot for Deepside Diggory? I hope they'll be nice to him. He really is an angel lamb.«

»He'll be on velvet. You are clever, Grant is clever, and let us hope that Diggory will be clever too. And now we won't talk about bulls any more. I have reached saturation point.«

Cicely allowed a very small frown to appear. Then she said,

»I never really can make out whether you hate the country, or whether you won't talk about it because you would really like to live there most frightfully and farm like Grant does, only you can't.«

Frank said,

»Heaven forbid!« Then he laughed. »I'm coming down to a do at Field End with Anthony next weekend. Any chance of your being there?«

»Oh, yes, we'll be there. It's a birthday party for Georgina. At least it started that way, but now they've got Mirrie Field there it looks as if it was turning into a coming-out party for her. She's a Field relation that nobody had ever heard about before.«

»Before what?«

»Oh, the last couple of months or so. Old Jonathan ran into her somewhere, found out she was some kind of seventeenth cousin, and brought her back on a visit. She hasn't any people and she hasn't any money, but she's got a very clinging disposition, and if you ask me, I should say they'll have her for keeps.«

Frank was not interested in Mirrie Field—not then. He said, »Did I ask you?« in his most detached manner, and she pinched his arm and told him he would probably fall in love with Georgina Grey.

»Only I warn you it won't be the least bit of good, because if she doesn't take Anthony, it will almost certainly be Johnny Fabian.«

»Oh—what is he doing in your parts?«

»Making love to Georgina, I expect. Or Mirrie. Or both of them, but probably Georgina because of the money. He hasn't got a bean, and she is supposed to be Jonathan's heiress. Personally I should say that Mirrie was a runner-up, but Johnny can't afford to take risks. Anyhow, money or no money, Georgina will be an ass if she marries him. I don't suppose she will—she ought to know him too well for that. His stepmother, Mrs. Fabian, lives at Field End, you know.«

Frank's memory began to wake up.

»Oh yes, I remember. She's some sort of relation, isn't she—used to run the house?«

»Darling, she couldn't run a rabbit-hutch! She's an umpteenth cousin of old Jonathan's, and when he took on Georgina it was considered the right thing to have someone like that in the house. I think he clung to her as a protection against nurses and governesses who wanted

to boss him or marry him. Miss Vinnie says there were several determined attempts, so you may say Mrs. Fabian began by being Jonathan's chaperone. Miss Vinnie says he was dreadfully nervous about breaths of scandal. And of course Mrs. Fabian has clung like a leech. No, that's too bad of me—she's perfectly harmless, only quite terribly inefficient. I couldn't stand it myself, but I expect they are used to her. It's all right as long as Georgina doesn't let herself get so used to Johnny that she wakes up one morning and finds she has married him.«

»Any reason why she shouldn't?«

A bright colour came up under Cicely's brown skin.

»As if you didn't know! He makes love to every girl he meets, and if Georgina married him she would have to look after him for the rest of her life—and she's not that sort, you know.«

»What sort is she?«

Cicely's expression changed. Her really lovely sherry-coloured eyes looked up at him.

»She is—« She hesitated for a word, and then said, »vulnerable. Most people wouldn't tell you that. They would say that she had looks and—and everything she wanted. But they don't know. She doesn't know either. She thinks everyone is like herself. She—she—oh, well she wouldn't know a snake if she saw one.«

»You're being harsh, aren't you? Is Johnny Fabian the snake?«

Cicely's chin lifted.

»Oh, I don't know—he might be.«

She bit her lip, and her colour went out like a blown flame. He had an impression that if she hadn't been dancing she might have stamped her foot. As it was, she jerked against his arm and came out with a burst of words.

»The trouble is she'll have a great deal too much money.«

Cicely herself had had too much money. Lady Evelyn Abbott's considerable fortune had gone past her father and Frank to the fifteen-year-old grand-daughter who was the only relation with whom she had not contrived to quarrel, and the first year of Cicely's marriage had nearly come to grief upon the prejudices and suspicions which her grand-mother's twisted mind had implanted. The memory of those miserable months was in her voice as she spoke.

Frank gave her a light answer.

»Most people could put up with that complaint.« And then, as she looked up at him again startled, »Don't make too much of it, Cis. Johnny wouldn't anyway.«

She said quite sharply like a little scratching cat,

»Anthony might.«

»Anthony? My good girl!«

Her voice turned obstinate.

»I don't think he would like a very rich wife. Some people don't.«

»Some people might think more about the wife than about the money. Personally, of course, I am waiting for a super heiress.«

»And when you've found her?«

»I shall forsake a sordid life of crime and return to the Sussex Downs and keep bees like Sherlock Holmes.«

»I should have thought you might have found your heiress by now if you had really looked for her.«

He laughed.

»Perhaps I haven't really looked!«

»Frank, why haven't you? Is it because of that Susan What's-her-name? Someone once told Mummy she was the only woman you had ever really been in love with.«

»And you always believe everything that anyone tells Monica?«

Cicely persisted.

»Was there really a Susan?«

»Quite a number of them. It's a popular name.«

»Oh, well, if you won't tell me—«

»So that you may tell Monica, and Monica may tell all her dearest friends? Thank you, my child!«

She made a little cross face.

»Oh, well, you'll have to marry some day. But I don't think Georgina would be any good. She's as fair as you are. You ought to marry a dark girl, or at any rate a brown one.«

»Like you?«

Cicely showed the tip of her tongue again.

»Exactly like me. What a pity I'm not twins!«

## **Chapter Two**

Frank Abbott drove down to Field End with Anthony Hallam on the following Saturday evening. They ran into fog and arrived so much later than they meant to that they were shown directly to their rooms and were obliged to hurry over their dressing. They had left the fog behind them, but all that he could see of the house as they drove up to it was the square Georgian look and enough light filtering through the curtains to show that not one of the rooms inside was dark. Memory supplied the rest—two ornamental gates both standing wide, a courtyard designed for the old coaching days, and the whole front of the house hung with Virginia creeper. He had spent school holidays not much more than a mile away at Deeping, when old Lady Evelyn was still reigning in Abbotsleigh and had not as yet had any irrevocable quarrel with him. He knew all this part of the country like the back of his hand. Deeping village still alluded to him as Mr. Frank, and he could remember Field End in an early September frost, standing foursquare with its face to the road, hung with a crimson, vermilion and scarlet tapestry. There would be no leaves now, only a winter tracery of slender brown stems. He could not recall that he had ever been inside the house before, though he had known Jonathan Field by sight, tall and thin, with a habit of walking bare-headed in the wildest weather with his rather long grey hair blowing out behind him.

Coming down dressed with Anthony, they encountered Jonathan in the hall. Frank didn't know what he had expected, but there was a distinct jab of surprise as he realised how little the old boy had changed. The tall, thin figure was just as upright, the grey hair no greyer, the whole look and aspect so entirely that supplied by memory, that he could almost have expected to hear his grandmother announced and to see her make an imposing entrance in the black velvet and diamonds of a state occasion.

The picture was momentarily so vivid that the entrance of Mrs. Fabian struck a jarring note. She came from the direction of the dining-room, and he remembered that she had always been in a hurry. She was in a hurry now—quite breathless with it in fact, her hair, which was no longer brown but had never made up its mind to turn grey, floating rather wildly from a twist of purple chiffon, and the diamond brooch at her shoulder coming undone. It actually dropped off as she shook hands with Anthony. And then, when he had picked it up and whilst she was fastening it, Frank was being explained and she was asserting that of course she remembered him perfectly.

»You used to stay with Lady Evelyn at Abbotsleigh in your school holidays. I don't think I ever really met you, but I used to think how tall and thin you were—and so very much like your grandmother.«

This was not, of course, the most tactful approach. Although perfectly well aware of his resemblance to that formidable lady, it did not please her grandson to be reminded of the fact.

Her portrait still dominated the drawing-room at Abbotsleigh with its long pale face, its bony nose, pale eyes, and the sleek fair hair above them.

He said, »So everyone tells me,« and she went on in a rambling inconsequent manner,

»But Georgina was only a little girl then—you won't remember her, but you will remember my stepson, Johnny Fabian—he was always here a good deal, but perhaps that was later on, because of course there was a family quarrel, wasn't there, and you stopped coming down. Family quarrels are always so distressing—of course any quarrels are. Your cousin Cicely and her husband—everyone was so glad when that was made up, and I believe they are coming here tonight. My dear mother brought us up never to let the sun go down on our wrath. "Kiss and be friends ere night descends" was what she used to say. And there was a verse my German governess made me learn—dear me, I hope I can remember it ... Ah, yes, I can! She held up her hand where a number of inexpensive and very dirty rings clustered like swarming bees, and quoted:

*Und hüte deine Zunge wohl,  
Bald ist ein böses Wort gesagt,  
Die Stunde kommt, die Stunde kommt,  
Wenn du an Gräbern stehst und klagst.*

»But if you don't understand German, perhaps I had better translate. Fräulein Weingarten used to make me say it every day:

*Guard your tongue well,  
An angry word is soon spoken,  
The hour will come, the hour will come,  
When you will stand and mourn by graves.*

»Not really a very cheerful verse to teach a child, but she always said I had a heedless tongue. Oh dear, it all seems so long ago.« She strayed on, saying vaguely, »I really think I heard a car. Did anyone else hear it?«

From a little distance it was possible to observe that she was wearing what would have been a perfectly good black lace dress if she had not had the bright idea of relieving it with some bits of faded fur, a couple of purple bows, and a large bunch of rather tumbled violets. There her attempts at adornment ceased. She displayed indeterminate features quite innocent of any effort in that direction. It was even doubtful whether they so much as knew the touch of a powder-puff.

Jonathan Field looked at his watch and said,

»Georgina ought to be down. Where is she? She and Mirrie—they ought both to be here.«

A very small voice said, »Oh, Uncle Jonathan—« and there beside them was a little creature in a white dress. She had dark curls, and the dress was all soft fluffy frills. She hung on Jonathan's arm and looked up at him with pansy-brown eyes.

»Don't—oh please don't be vexed! She won't be long—she really won't. I expect it was my fault—she was helping me. And it's going to be such a lovely party. You mustn't be vexed.« She was tugging at his arm like a child, but so softly as to give the effect of a caress.

Jonathan Field smiled indulgently. Anthony said, »Hullo, Mirrie!« and Frank Abbott found himself being introduced. The brown eyes transferred their upward look. They were of exactly the same shade as the clustering curls, but the lashes were darker, though whether this was due to nature or to art it was impossible to discern. The words of the introduction had been »My niece Mirrie Field«. Old Jonathan's smile had been practically a doting one. Distant cousin's daughter my foot—if she didn't finish up co-heiress with the real niece, he