

Title

Miss Silver Series
THE SILENT POOL

By
Patricia Wentworth

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About this eBook

“The Silent Pool” by Patricia Wentworth

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The Silent Pool

Chapter One

It was Miss Silver's practice to open her letters at the breakfast table. True to the maxims instilled into her when still extremely young, she was in the habit of giving duty the first place in her life. A call for her personal or professional assistance, whether by post or telephone, would therefore naturally precede any dalliance with the morning papers, of which she took two—one of that aloof and lofty character which made even the most world-shaking events seem to be taking place at an immense distance and to have very little bearing upon daily life; the other frankly given over to headlines, a lively presentment of politics, and such immediate and pressing matters as who had been married, murdered, or divorced.

She picked up the letters and sorted them out. There was one from her niece Ethel Burkett, who was the wife of a bank manager in the Midlands. She opened it at once. Roger, the youngest of the three boys, had not been very well when Ethel wrote last, and it was a relief to read in reassuring phrases that he was now quite himself again and had returned to school. A piece of family news followed. Mrs Burkett wrote:

“You will, I know, be delighted to hear of the safe arrival of Dorothy's twins, a boy and a girl. They are fine babies, and she and Jim are perfectly delighted. Really, after ten years of having no children and being dreadfully unhappy about it, they haven't done so badly, have they—first a boy and then a girl, and now both together. Personally I feel that they should stop there!”

Jim being Ethel Burkett's brother and Miss Silver's nephew, this was intelligence of a most gratifying nature. Two coatees and three pairs of infant socks had already been despatched to Dorothy Silver, but it now became imperative that the gift should be doubled. She remembered with pleasure that she had plenty of the sock wool, and that only yesterday she had noticed some very attractive pale blue balls in Messiter's wool department which would be just the thing for the little coatees.

Leaving the rest of Ethel's letter to be read at her leisure, she turned to one from her other niece, Gladys. It contained, as she had expected, a number of complaints and more than one hint that an invitation to stay with “dear Auntie” would be some slight mitigation of her lot. Miss Silver had a kind heart, but it did not dispose her to pity Gladys. She had married of her own free will. Her husband was a most worthy man if rather dull. He had been no less so when she chose to marry him. He was now not quite so well off—very few people were. But Gladys, having married to escape the necessity of working for her living, considered it a grievance that she was now obliged to sweep, and dust, and cook. She did all three very badly, and Miss Silver felt a good deal of sympathy for Andrew Robinson.

A glance at the untidy scribbled page having assured her that the letter was just what she expected, she laid it aside and took up a letter with the Ledbury postmark. She knew Ledshire well and had many friends there, but this large, distinctive handwriting was strange to her, the paper thicker and more expensive than most people could now afford. She straightened out a double sheet and read: "Mrs Smith presents her compliments to Miss Maud Silver and would be glad if she could make an appointment for some time between 10 a.m., and noon tomorrow, Thursday. She expects to be in London, and will ring up from her hotel to confirm the appointment and decide upon the hour."

Miss Silver observed the sheet with interest. It had been cut down by a couple of inches, obviously in order to remove an address. The writing showed signs of hurry, and there were two blots. She decided that it might be interesting to see this Mrs Smith and to find out what she wanted.

But she had time not only to finish her breakfast and to read, first dear Ethel's letter, so warm, so full of the details of a happy family life, and afterwards with frowning distaste that from Gladys Robinson, which differed only from many of her previous efforts in that it went so far as actually to ask for money—"Andrew keeps me so short, and if I take it out of the housekeeping he goes on dreadfully. He doesn't seem to think that I must have clothes! And he is quite disagreeable if I so much as speak to anyone else! So if you possibly could, dear Auntie——"

Miss Silver gathered up her letters and the newspapers and went through to the sitting-room of her flat. She hardly ever came into it after the briefest absence without feeling a gush of gratitude to what she called Providence for having enabled her to achieve this modest comfort. During twenty years of her life she had expected nothing more than to be a governess in other people's houses, and to retire eventually upon some very small pittance. Then suddenly there had opened before her a completely new way of life. Equipped with strong moral principles, a passion for justice, and a gift for reading the human heart, she had entered upon a career as a private detective. She was not unknown to Scotland Yard. Chief Detective Inspector Lamb had a high esteem for her. If it was sometimes tinged with exasperation, this did not interfere with an old and sincere friendship. Inspector Frank Abbott in moments of irreverence declared that his esteemed Chief suspected "Maudie" of powers alarmingly akin to witchcraft—but then it is notorious that this brilliant officer sometimes allows himself to talk in a very extravagant manner.

Miss Silver having laid the newspapers upon the top of a small revolving book-case, put her nieces' letters into a drawer of the writing-table and deposited Mrs Smith's communication upon the blotter.

The room was a pleasant one. To the modern eye it contained too many pictures, too much furniture, and far too many photographs. The pictures, in frames of yellow maple, were reproductions of Victorian masterpieces—Sir John Millais' Bubbles and the Soul's Awakening, Mr G. F. Watts' Hope, and a melancholy Landseer Stag; the chairs in walnut profusely carved but surprisingly comfortable with their curved arms and capacious laps; the photographs almost a guide to the fashions of the past twenty years in much older frames, relics from an age devoted to silver filigree and plush. These photographs were, in fact, a record of Miss Silver's cases. In serving the ends of justice she had saved the good name, the happiness, sometimes even the life of these people who smiled at her from the mantelpiece, from the top of the book-case, and from any other place where it had been possible to find room for them. There were a great many pictures of the babies for whom she had knitted shawls and socks and little woolly coatees. As she stood by the writing-table she looked about her with pleasure. The sun slanted in between her peacock-blue curtains and just touching the edge of the carpet, showed how well the colours matched.

As she pulled out the writing-chair and sat down, the telephone bell rang. Lifting the receiver, she heard a deep voice say, "Is that 15 Montague Mansions?"

She said, "Yes."

It was a woman's voice, though almost deep enough to have been a man's. It spoke again.

"Is that Miss Maud Silver?"

Miss Silver said, "Speaking."

The voice went on.

"You will have had my letter by now—asking for an appointment—Mrs Smith."

"Yes, I have had it."

"When can I see you?"

"I am free now."

"Then I will come at once. I suppose it will take me about twenty minutes. Good-bye."

The receiver was hung up. Miss Silver replaced her own. Then she took up her pen and began to write a short but severe letter to her niece Gladys.

She had made some progress with the much more agreeable task of answering dear Ethel's letter point by point, when the front door bell rang and she was obliged to put it away. A moment later her devoted Emma Meadows was opening the door and announcing,

"Mrs Smith."

Chapter Two

A stooping elderly woman came into the room. She had a fuzz of grey hair under a shabby felt hat with some incongruous and rather dusty veiling in a straggle about the brim. In spite of what was almost summer weather she wore one of those fur coats which disguise the original rabbit under the name of seal-coney. It was old-fashioned in cut and evidently long in wear. Beneath it there was some black woollen garment with an uneven hem. Black shoes, solid and low in the heel, and rubbed black gloves completed the picture.

Miss Silver shook hands and invited her visitor to be seated. She appeared to be somewhat out of breath, and as she crossed the floor a limp became noticeable.

Miss Silver gave her time. She took the chair on the other side of the hearth, reached for the knitting-bag which lay on the small table at her elbow, and taking out a ball of fine white wool, began to cast on the number of stitches required for an infant's vest. Such a good thing that she had plenty of this exceptionally soft wool, since Dorothy's unexpected twin would require a complete outfit.

In the opposite chair, Mrs Smith had produced a large white handkerchief and was fanning herself. She had been breathing rather quickly, but she now laid down the handkerchief and said,

"You must excuse me. I'm not much in the way of climbing stairs." Her voice was gruff and her way of speaking abrupt. There was just the least suspicion of a London accent.

Miss Silver had finished casting on and was knitting rapidly after the continental fashion. She said in her pleasant voice,

"Pray, what can I do for you?"

Mrs Smith said, "Well, I don't know." She was pleating the edge of the linen handkerchief. "I've come to see you professionally."

"Yes?"

"I heard about you from a friend—no need to say who it was. In fact from first to last of my business it's a case of least said soonest mended."

Knitting was so much second nature to Miss Silver that she was able to give full attention to her client. She said,

“It does not matter at all who recommended you to consult me, but I must warn you that my ability to help you will depend a good deal on whether you can make up your mind to be frank.”

Mrs Smith’s head came up in the manner which used to be called bridling. She said,

“Oh, well, that would depend——”

Miss Silver smiled.

“Upon whether you felt that you could trust me? I cannot help you at all unless you do so. Half measures are quite useless. As Lord Tennyson so beautifully puts it, ‘Oh trust me all in all, or not at all’.”

“That,” said Mrs Smith, “is a bit of a tall order.”

“Perhaps. But you will have to make up your mind. You did not really come here to consult me, did you? You came because you had been told about me, and because you wished to make up your mind as to whether you could trust me or not.”

“What makes you think of that?”

“It is the case with so many of my clients. It is not easy to speak to a stranger of one’s private affairs.”

Mrs Smith said with energy,

“That’s just it—they are private. I wouldn’t want it to get about that I’d been seeing a detective.”

There seemed suddenly to be a considerable distance between herself and Miss Silver. Without word or movement, this small governessy-looking person appeared to have receded. With her neat curled fringe, her dated dress—olive-green cashmere—the bog-oak brooch in the shape of a rose with a pearl at its heart, the black thread stockings, and the glacé shoes, too small for the modern foot, she might have stepped out of any old-fashioned photograph-album. And with that effect of withdrawal, she might have been just about to step back again. The astonishing thing was that Mrs Smith discovered that she didn’t want her to go. Before she knew what she was going to do she found that she was saying,

“Oh well, of course I know that anything I tell you would be all in confidence and perfectly safe.”

“Yes, it would be perfectly safe.”

Mrs Smith’s manner had changed imperceptibly, and her voice too. It had a naturally deep tone, but some of the gruffness went out of it. She said.

“Well, you’re right, you know—I did just come to have a look at you. When I tell you why, I daresay you will see for yourself that it was quite a sensible thing to do.”

“And now that you have seen me?”

Mrs Smith made a quite involuntary gesture. Her hand lifted and fell. It was a small thing, but it did not go very well with the rabbit coat and the rest of her appearance. She would have done better to go on pleating the linen handkerchief. That slight graceful gesture was out of key. She realized it a moment too late, and said with a little more accent than before.

“Oh, I’m going to consult you. Only of course it’s a bit difficult to begin.”

Miss Silver said nothing. She continued to knit. She had seen so many clients in this room—some of them badly frightened, some of them dazed with grief, some in great need of kindness and reassurance. Mrs Smith did not appear to come into any of these categories. She had her own plan and her own way of carrying it out. If she had made up her mind to speak she would speak, and if she had not made it up she would remain silent. Suddenly and abruptly it appeared that she had made up her mind to speak.

“Look here,” she said, “it’s this way. I’ve got an idea that someone is trying to kill me.”

This was not the first time that Miss Silver had listened to these or similar words. She sustained no shock of disbelief, but said calmly and firmly,

“What grounds have you for thinking so, Mrs Smith?”

The black gloved hands were plucking at the handkerchief.

“There was some soup—it tasted—odd. I didn’t take it. There was a fly on a drop that was spilled. Afterwards it was lying there dead.”

“What happened to the remainder of the soup?”

“It had been thrown away.”

“By whom?”

“By the person who brought it to me. I told her there was something wrong with it, and she flushed it down the sink in the bathroom.”

“There is a sink in the bathroom?”

“Yes. I don’t go downstairs so much since I have been lame. It is convenient to be able to do the washing-up on the spot.”

“And it is done by someone who brought you the soup. Who is this person?”

“I suppose you might call her a—help. I have been a bit of an invalid—she looks after me. And you needn’t start suspecting her, because she would a good deal rather poison herself than me.”

Miss Silver said briskly,

“You should have kept the soup and had it analysed.”

“I didn’t think of it like that. You see, it was mushroom soup—I just thought a wrong one had got in. Not that Mrs ——” She pulled herself up with a jerk. “I mean, anyone who was a good cook would know a toadstool from a mushroom, wouldn’t they?”

Miss Silver ignored this.

“You imply that you did not think much of the incident at the time. Will you tell me what has made you think more seriously of it now?”

Dark eyes looked from behind the dusty veiling. There was a little pause before Mrs Smith said,

“It was because of the other things that happened. One thing—well, it mightn’t mean much, but when there are a lot of things happening one after another it makes you think, doesn’t it?”

Miss Silver’s needles clicked. She said gravely,

“If there were several incidents, I should like you to begin with the first one and then tell me about the others in the order in which they occurred. It was some time after the episode of the mushroom soup that you first began to suspect that there was anything wrong?”

“Well, it was, and it wasn’t. It wasn’t the first thing that happened, if that is what you mean.”

“Then will you please begin at the beginning and take things in their right order.”

Mrs Smith said, “Oh, the first thing was my accident—five—no, six months ago.”

“What happened?”

“It was one of those dark afternoons just before you put the lights on, and I was going down the stairs. And the bother is I can’t swear to anything, because you know how it is when you have a fall, you don’t really remember a lot about it. The first thing I knew I was down in the hall with a broken leg—and I can’t swear I was pushed, but I’ve got my own ideas about it.”

“You think that someone pushed you?”

“Pushed or tripped me—it doesn’t much matter which. And it’s no use you asking me who could have done it, because it might have been anyone in the house, or it mightn’t have been anyone at all. Only no one is going to get me to believe that I just went crashing down those stairs on my own.”

Miss Silver said, “I see——” And then, “And the next thing?”

“The soup, like I told you.”

“And after that?”

Mrs Smith frowned.

“There were the sleeping-tablets. That was what made me feel I had better come and see you. The doctor gave me some when I broke my leg, but I don’t like those sort of things. They’ve got a way of getting hold of you, and I’ve seen too much of that. So I’ve never taken one except when the pain was pretty bad. There was about a half bottle of them, and I suppose I might have had six or seven in the six months. And then just the other day I thought I’d take one. Well, you know how one does, I tipped the bottle up on to my palm and quite a lot of tablets came out. I was just looking at them and not thinking anything, when all at once it seemed to me there was one that was different from the others. If it had come out by itself, I don’t know that I should have taken any notice—sometimes I wake up in the night and think about that—but seeing it there among the others, it seemed to me it was bigger than it ought to be, and that someone had been messing it up. I took a magnifying-glass and I looked at it, and you could see where it had been cut open and stuck together again. It gave me the cold shivers and I couldn’t throw it out of the window quick enough.”

Miss Silver gave a short hortatory cough.

“If you will allow me to say so, that was extremely foolish.”

Mrs Smith said heartily,

“Of course it was, but I didn’t stop to think, any more than if I’d got a wasp on my hand and was shaking it off.”

“This happened recently?”

“Monday night.”

Miss Silver put down her knitting, went over to the writing-table, and came back with an exercise-book in a shiny blue cover. Propping it on her knee, she wrote in it in pencil, heading the page with the name of Smith followed by a query. This done, she looked up with the bright expectancy of a bird on the alert for a suitable worm.

“Before we go any farther I should like to have the names and some description of the other members of your household. Their real names, if you please.”

Mrs Smith was observed to hesitate. Then she said with a shade of defiance in her voice,

“And what makes you say that?”

Miss Silver gave her the smile which had won the confidence of so many clients and said,

“I find some difficulty in believing that your own name is really Smith.”

“And why?”

Miss Silver’s pencil remained poised.

“Because ever since you came into this room you have been acting a part. You did not wish to be recognized, and you presented an extremely convincing portrait of someone very different from yourself.”

There was a faint mocking inflection in Mrs Smith’s voice as she said,

“If it was convincing, in what way did it fail to convince you?”

Miss Silver looked at her gravely.

“Handwriting,” she observed, “is often quite a reliable guide to character. Yours, if I may say so, did not lead me to expect a Mrs Smith. Also the paper on which your letter was written was not what she would have employed.”

“That was stupid of me.” The deep voice now had no trace of a London accent. “Anything else?”

“Oh, yes. Mrs Smith would not, I think, have troubled to put an eye-veil on to so old a hat. She would not have worn an eye-veil at all. It occurred to me at once that you did not wish me to have too good a view of your eyes. You were, in fact, afraid that you might be recognized.”

“And did you recognize me?”

Miss Silver smiled.

“Your eyes are not easily forgotten. You kept them down as much as possible, but you needed to look at me, because that was why you had come here—to look at me and to make up your mind about consulting me. You disguised your voice very well—the slight accent and the jerky way of speaking. But it was by one slight, almost involuntary movement that you really gave yourself away. It is, I imagine, one which is habitual to you, but I had seen you employ it in the character of Mrs Alving in *Ghosts*. Your left hand just rose and fell again. It was the simplest thing, but there was something about it which was very effective, very moving. It has remained in my memory as part of a very notable performance. When you made that same movement just now I felt quite sure that you were Adriana Ford.”

Adriana broke into deep melodious laughter.

“I knew as soon as I had done it that I had slipped up over that hand business. It was out of character. But I thought the rest of it was pretty good. The coat is a treasured relic of Meeson’s—she’s my maid—used to be my dresser. And the hat is one she was going to throw away. Frankly, I thought it was a masterpiece, veiling and all. Anyhow it was my eyes I was afraid about. My photographs have always rather featured them.” She pulled off the hat as she spoke. The fuzzy grey wig came too. Her own hair appeared, short, thick, and beautifully tinted to a deep Titian red. She said in a laughing voice, “Well, that’s better, isn’t it? Of course the hair is all wrong with these clothes and no proper make-up, but we can at least see each other now. I hated having to peer at you through that damned veil.”

She tossed hat and wig on to the nearest chair and straightened herself. The stoop was no more hers than the rabbit coat. Adriana Ford’s back was straight enough.

This was no longer Mrs Smith nor was it the tragic Mrs Alving, the terrifying and heart-shaking Lady Macbeth of a decade ago, or the warm and exquisite Juliet of thirty years back. Stripped of her disguise, here was a woman who had lived for a long time and crowded that time with triumphs. There was an air of vigour, there was an air of authority. There was humour, there was a capacity for emotion. The dark eyes were still beautiful and the brows above them finely arched.

Miss Silver saw these things and the something else for which she looked. It was there in the eyes and in the set of the mouth. There had been wakeful nights and days of indecision and strain before Adriana Ford had brought herself to play the part of Mrs Smith and bring her troubles to a stranger. She said,

“Perhaps you will now give me the particulars for which I asked you.”

Chapter Three

Adriana Ford laughed.

“Persistent—aren’t you?” she said. The laughter passed. She went on in her deep voice, “You want to know who was in the house, and what they were doing, and whether I think any one of them has been trying to kill me—don’t you? Well, I can give you a list of names, but it isn’t going to help you any more than it has helped me. Sometimes I think I’m imagining the whole thing. I came to see you because quite suddenly I felt I couldn’t just sit and wait for the next thing to happen. Quite a lot of people come and go at Ford House. I’ll give you their names and tell you who they are, but I want it to be clearly understood that I’m not suspecting anyone or accusing anyone, and that if I say the word, you will tear up any notes you may have taken and forget everything I’ve told you.”

Miss Silver said,

“I have already assured you that whatever you say will be in confidence. Always provided that no tragic event should necessitate the intervention of the law.”

Adriana’s hand rose and fell. It was the gesture Miss Silver had remembered—slight, graceful, and expressive.