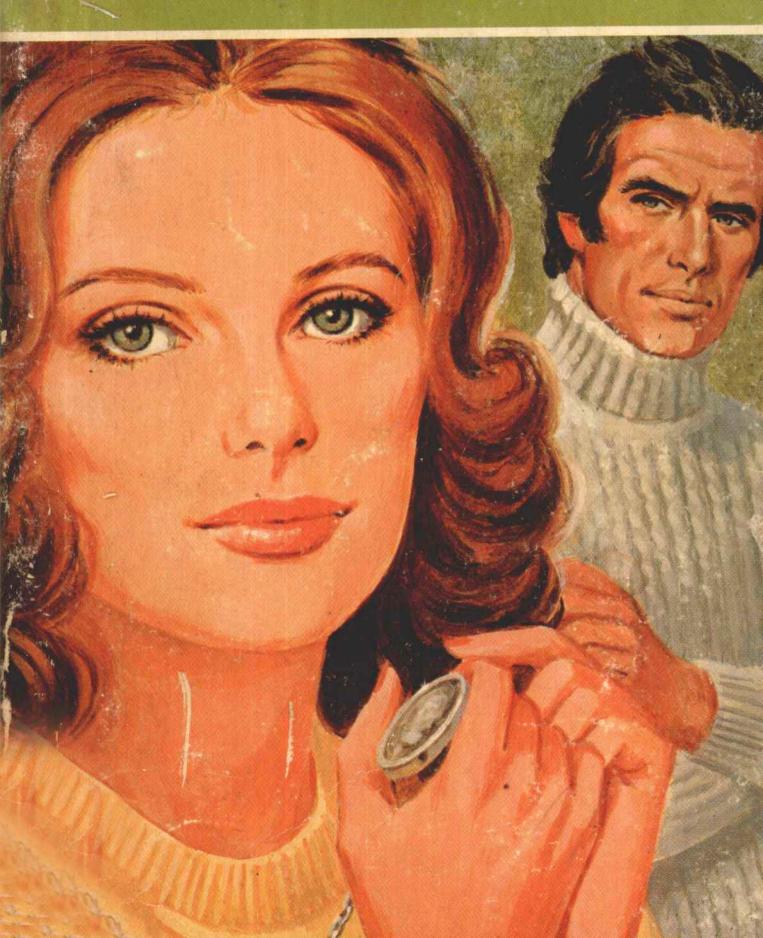


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The Silver Link

by
MARY WIBBERLEY



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CHAPTER ONE

'I won't do it,' said Sara. 'You'll just have to get somebody else.'

'Oh yes? Like who?' inquired her sister dryly. 'Ann? Frances? They're competent enough typists, but not skilled enough for this fellow. He wants a tip-top secretary who's able to work intelligently in collaboration with him on this book——'

'And what about you?'

'I know. He thinks it's me he's hired—but you know why I can't go, love. It'll have to be you.'

'My dear, daft Helen, if you think my idea of paradise is to travel up to this old gentleman's remote fastness in the Lake District and pore over duty files on antique silver for three weeks while you're swanning it on the Cornish Riviera with Gerry Hutton—you are vastly mistaken.'

'I shan't be "swanning it" as you so elegantly put it. I shall be working damned hard and you know it.' Helen smiled in mild exasperation, the nearest she would ever get to impatience, and held out her hand, palm uppermost. 'Be reasonable, love. We can't afford to turn down chances like this. It's our living. And Gerry is a real slavedriver, but I can cope with his tantrums.'

Sara's face softened. She knew Helen was right, because she always was. It was just that she had no intention of going under without a struggle. She sighed. 'Okay, you win. Just write to me, that's all, and let me know how you're going on. That man must be blind. Why hasn't he fallen for you yet?'

Helen burst out laughing. 'Because he's too wrapped up in his work to see me as a woman, that's why. But I'm working on it.'

Sara went to the window and looked down on the busy street below. Cars passed, lorries hooted impatiently as they waited to be unloaded, and pedestrians scurried along in the rain, intent on their own affairs, never looking upwards because they didn't imagine there could be anything worth seeing three floors up in the decrepit building over the cash-and-carry warehouse. The gilt letters on the window needed repainting. Sara traced them gently with her finger.

'Excelsior Staff Agency,' they proclaimed, the wrong way round of course, and it sounded quite impressive, and as most of their business was done by telephone or letter, their clients were blissfully unaware that the superbly efficient staff they hired came from such unsalubrious headquarters. Their letter-headings were quite something too. Helen made economies wherever possible, but believed that beautifully typed letters, on importantly headed paper, were more than half the battle. Sara turned round to her again, knowing that without her their little business would not have survived six months, let alone three years.

'When do I go?' she asked.

'Saturday morning. He's sent all the details of trains and things, and says you'll be met. He's also sent your ticket.' She picked up an envelope from the orderly clutter on the huge desk. 'Here you are.'

'Mmm.' Sara scanned the letter. 'I don't think much of his typing. Mind you, if he's ancient, it's not too bad. What do I say when I tell him you've sent your sister instead of you?'

Helen shrugged. 'Anything you like. The truth. That I've had to dash off to St Ives to type out a play for a brilliant play when who is extremely temperamental and refuses to set foot in London-anyway, it was indirectly through Gerry that this fellow must have heard of us, because in his first letter, which I have here somewhere'-she began to open drawers, frowning slightly-'he said that a Mr Hutton had given his nephew our address--' she stopped fumbling. 'Ah, here it is.' She began to read silently, eyes skimming the page, then: '-and my nephew Hal, who was wroking-wroking?' She looked up and laughed. 'His wayward typewriter does need a few spelling lessons, doesn't it? Hmm, where was I? Oh yes, wroking in St Ives last year had your address given to him by a Mr Hutton, who recommended you highly'-she looked up-'and so on. He needn't necessarily be ancient, Sara. Just because he has a working nephew---'

'Oh, he will be. Mine always are.'

Helen's mouth twitched. 'It's just as well they are,' she said. 'With your looks no man under the age of fifty would get any work done——'

'Flattery will get you nowhere,' rejoined Sara smartly, and pulled a face. 'I'd better go home and start packing. What about Frances? Have you given her all her instructions—?'

'Everything is under control,' Helen cut in smoothly. 'And I don't go till Tuesday anyway. Gerry's having a party over the weekend, and he says they usually last three days, so he told me I'll be in time to do the washing up when I get there.'

'And will you?' Sara was fascinated.

'I have no intention of cleaning up after his friends, my dear. As he will find out when I arrive.'

'Mmm. And are you staying at your usual pub?'

'Yes. You've got the phone number. Ring me when you can.'

The conversation came back to Sara as she sat in the train thundering north on Friday morning. Magazines and a newspaper lay on the table before her, but she had no wish to read. For a while she was content to gaze out of the window at the bare autumn trees flashing past. More distantly, fields and farms and isolated houses, and she wondered how remote Raynor House would be. She sat back comfortably against the headrest and let her mind wander back in time. Train travel always had this effect on her. There was something so soothing and conducive to thought about the steady rhythmic click-click of the wheels as they slid over the points, the drumming of the engines, the gentle sway of the carriage from time to time...

She opened her eyes. She had been nearly asleep, and in that half dozing state, very aware of her father, as he had been years ago. Her heart was beating faster now, as always when she thought of him, and the life they had led, travelling over Europe on lavish holidays, staying at the best hotels, no expense spared . . . Until the day, the awful day when their whole world had crumbled. Nine—or was it ten years ago? She couldn't exactly remember, but she had been nearly fourteen, Helen three years older, and with a sensible head on her shoulders from caring for Sara since their mother had died when Sara was eight. Their father, whose wealth had seemed assured, had gone bankrupt. But worse than that. There had been scandal in the papers, and the whole affair had

dragged on for months. Helen and Sara had left their boarding school and gone to live with an aunt in a tiny village near Stafford. She had insisted they changed their name to hers, and Helen and Sara Enderby had become Helen and Sara Good. Because the name Marcus Enderby no longer had the ring of respectability around it.

And two years later their father had died, a broken man. Sara's hand went up to her neck, as if to reassure herself that the pendant was still there. Gently her fingers touched the heavy silver medallion that she always wore, memory supplying the image she could not at the moment see. It had been a present from her father on her thirteenth birthday, the last present she was ever to receive from him, and doubly precious for that. It was the head of a woman etched in the solid silver, and so heavy that it needed a thick silver chain to support it. She was never without it, for in a way it went with everything she wore. She knew that it was hundreds of years old, but little else about it.

The engine's rumble deepened to thunder as they roared into a tunnel, and Sara looked at the black window to see her face reflected in the glass. The cool sculpted beauty of her features looked back at her, and her dark auburn tresses tumbling about her face only served to make her seem fragile and delicate. But her eyes were on the medallion, for she knew full well what her face was like, and was completely without vanity. Helen's astute comment came back to her—'with your looks, no man under fifty would get any work done—' Sara sighed. Her life, since mid-teens, had been a constant battle to fight men—the wrong sort of men—off. And that was the trouble. The right sort kept well away from her, too frightened to speak, for she knew only too well that she scared them. How nice it must be, she thought,

to be ordinary. A remark of one of Helen's boy-friends had remained to haunt her. 'She's so cool and unapproachable, your sister,' he had told Helen. 'Like a princess.' She blinked as the train exploded into daylight again. That was the way of things, she thought wryly, and if only all those girls who glare daggers at me at parties knew how I envied them their very normality, they'd be surprised. She closed her eyes. What would Mr Raynor be like? Old and safely married, she hoped, and surreptitiously crossed her fingers.

She looked at her watch. Within an hour she would know. It was time to read a magazine, if only to stop uncomfortable thoughts intruding. Sara picked one up, and opened it, well aware that a man opposite had hardly taken his eyes off her since they had left London. But she was used to that.

Sara watched the train vanish round a curve in the track, and turned away towards the ticket office. The platform of the small station was deserted. She had been the only person to leave the train, and for a moment, panic filled her. What if she had got off at the wrong stop? There was certainly no one waiting for anybody here, and it was growing dusk.

'Excuse me, miss, you waiting for Mr Raynor?' A friendly, inquiring face appeared as if by magic from the open window of the ticket office, and Sara, relieved, went towards him.

'Oh yes,' she said. 'I was just wondering---'

'Aye, he's just phoned. The car won't be long, about ten minutes. You want to sit down in the waiting room and I'll fetch you a cup of tea?'

'Thank you. Please don't put yourself to any

'No trouble. Kettle's just boiling. Shan't be a tick.' The head vanished, the window slammed shut, and Sara, amused, and slightly lighter of heart, went to the small cell that bore the huge and important sign 'Waiting Room' on its door.

The stationmaster was a little roly-poly of a man, and he carried a steaming cup of tea, which he handed to her. 'There y'are, miss. All part of British Rail's service—seeing as you were the only passenger, like. And seeing as you've got to wait.' He sat on the bench at the table. 'Aye, there used to be a bus running from here to Hunter's Fell, but now you either have to have a car, or walk there, and it's a few miles, that it is.' He shook his head. 'You made the connection all right at Kendal, did you?'

'Yes. I had about five minutes' wait, that was all.'

'And you'll have come up from London? A long journey that.'

'It is,' agreed Sara. 'In fact I wouldn't mind walking a few miles now just for the exercise!'

'Ha, you'd be sorry after ten minutes' walk. In the wilds it is, Raynor House, right stuck in the middle of nowhere well to the other side of Hunter's Fell—you'd not walk that in a hurry, I can tell you.'

'Oh.' She digested the information in silence for a moment. A house in the wilds! Something must have shown in her face, for the kindly little man shook his head.

'It's not that bad, miss. It's a beautiful house. I've heard—though I've never been in it, I must admit, and it is only three miles from the village—' then he stopped and cocked his head, as if listening. 'I can hear the car now. Finish your tea and I'll take your cases.'

She followed him outside, and had her second surprise.

A large sleek Rolls-Royce waited in the yard, and a greyhaired man walked towards her. He was tall, dressed in tweed suit, ruddy-cheeked, and at least fifty. Lovely, thought Sara, and held out her hand.

'Mr Raynor? I'm Sara Good,' and she heard the stationmaster chuckle as the man, smiling, shook hands with her and answered:

'Hello, no, I'm not Mr Raynor. My name's Wilson, I work for him. Sorry I'm late, but I had to call in at the village for something on my way. Mr Raynor phoned, did he?' he turned to the stationmaster. Clearly they were old friends, and Sara's momentary confusion vanished in the warmth of the atmosphere.

'Aye, he did that, Bill. I've looked after your young lady as best I could. Her coming all that way, it was the least I could do.' And he winked at Sara.

'And you looked after me very nicely too,' she said, as they shook hands and a couple of coins were discreetly passed over.

'Thank you, miss. Have a pleasant stay.' Heavens, she thought, he thinks I'm coming on holiday.

The cases were stowed away in the boot, Sara seated herself beside the driver, and the car purred away from the station and along the village street.

'I'm sorry I mistook you for Mr Raynor, Mr Wilson,'
Sara said. 'But I didn't know who to expect.'

'Call me Wilson—or Bill, whichever you prefer,' he said. 'I'm his driver and general handyman, and my wife's the housekeeper at Raynor House.'

They had left the village behind now, and were approaching open country. Hills towered on either side of the road, thickly covered with trees. 'Have you been in the Lake District before?' he asked her.

'No. Never. It's beautiful, isn't it?'