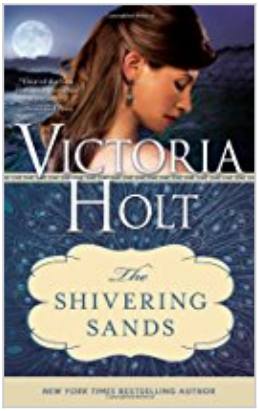

The Shivering Sands (Casablanca Classics)

By Victoria Holt

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Mystery and romance combine with deadly secrets in this Victorian gothic thriller from an internationally bestselling author

Caroline Verlaine knows something is wrong. Her sister has gone missing and no one can tell her why. The only option is to go where Roma was last seen-an estate with a deadly history.

The Stacy family has lived off the Dover coast for generations, carefully navigating the treacherous quicksands nearby. But the sands aren't Caroline's biggest threat. Everyone here has a secret, especially the enigmatic young heir **Napier Stacy**. No matter where Caroline turns, the ground she walks is dangerous. And the closer Caroline comes to unraveling the truth, the closer she comes to sharing her sister's fate.

Blending elements of historical romance and romantic suspense, *The Shivering Sands* is an exhilarating tale from the Queen of Gothic Romance. **Dark and thrilling**, fans of Georgette Heyer, Mary Stewart, and Daphne Du Maurier will be kept guessing in this classic story, complete with ancient ruins, family scandal, and forbidden love.

Other Titles from Victoria Holt
The India Fan: Drusilla's glamorous neighbors gift her a priceless family heirloom-a beautiful fans with a terrible curse
The Pride and the Peacock: To secure her inheritance, Jessica Clavering agrees to a marriage of convenience, but will her handsome new husband's desire for her ever surpass his obsession with a famously cursed opal?
The Time of the Hunter's Moon: According to legend, a girl will see her future husband at the time of the hunter's moon. But when the handsome stranger revealed to Cordelia Grant disappears after an all-too-brief encounter, she has to wonder: Was he merely an apparition...or something more?

What readers are saying about The Shivering Sands

"The feel of this story was similar to that of Rebecca-the sort of **dark, shivery, mysterious** feeling. The end was WAY better in my opinion, though. Definitely a good read!"

"This is a **five-star** historical, romance, mystery, psychological thriller."

"The **most suspenseful book ever**, and many years later, after having read countless Holt books, I can safely say that this is her best work."

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- Sales Rank: #164802 in Books
- Brand: Brand: Sourcebooks Casablanca
- Published on: 2013-09-03
- Released on: 2013-09-03
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 8.00" h x 5.00" w x 1.00" l, .72 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 336 pages

Editorial Review

About the Author
Eleanor Alice Burford Hibbert, better known to readers as Victoria Holt, Philippa Carr, and Jean Plaidy, was one of the world's most beloved and enduring authors. Her career spanned five decades and she continued to write historical fiction and romantic suspense until her death in 1993.

1

I am wondering where I should begin my story. Should it be on the day when I saw Napier and Edith being married in the little church at Lovat Mill? Or when I was sitting in the train starting out on my journey to discover the truth behind the disappearance of my sister Roma? So much of importance happened before either of these significant events; yet perhaps I should choose the second alternative because it was then that I became inescapably involved.

Roma-my practical, reliable sister-had disappeared. There had been enquiries; there had been theories; but no indication of where she had gone had been revealed. I believed the solution to the mystery was to be found where she had last been seen; and I was determined to discover what had happened to her. My concern for Roma was helping me over a difficult period of my life, for sitting in that train was a lonely and bereaved woman-brokenhearted, I should have said had I been a sentimentalist, which I was not. Indeed, I was a cynic-so I assured myself. Life with Pietro had made me so. Now here I was without Pietro, like a piece of driftwood-lost and aimless-and with only the smallest of incomes which it was imperative to augment by some means, when this opportunity was offered to me by what appeared to be the benign hand of fate.

When it had been clear to me that I must do something if I wanted to eat adequately and keep a watertight roof over my head, I had tried taking pupils and I had a few but the money this brought in was not enough. I had believed that in time I should build up a clientele and perhaps discover a young genius which would have made my life worthwhile; but so far my ears had been in constant rebellion against halting rendering of The Blue Bells of Scotland and no budding Beethoven ever sat on my piano stool.

I was a woman who had tasted life and found it bitter-no, bittersweet, as all life is; but the sweetness was gone and the bitterness remained. Poised, yes, and experienced; the thick gold band on the third finger of my left hand bore evidence of that. Young to be so bitter? I was all of twenty-eight, but that would generally be agreed to be young to have become a widow.

The train had traveled through the Kent countryside, that "Garden of England" which would shortly be pink and white with blossoming cherry, plum and apple, past hopfields and cowled oast houses, and was plunging into a tunnel to emerge a few moments later into the uncertain sunshine of a March afternoon. The coastline from Folkestone to Dover was startlingly white against the gray green sea and a few gray clouds were being scurried across the sky by a tetchy east wind. It was sending the water hurtling against the cliffs so that the spray shone like silver.

Perhaps, like the train, I was emerging from my dark tunnel and coming into sunshine.

It was the sort of remark which would have made Pietro laugh. He would have pointed out what a romantic I was under that entirely false facade of worldliness.

Such uncertain sunshine, I noticed at once, with a hint of cruelty in the wind-and the ever unpredictable sea.

Then I suffered the familiar grief, the longing, the frustration, and Pietro's face rose up from the past as though to say: A new life? You mean a life without me. Do you think you will ever escape from me?

No, was the answer to that. Never. You will always be there, Pietro. There is no escape...not even the grave.

Tomb, I told myself flippantly, would sound so much better. Much more Grand Opera. That was what Pietro would have said-Pietro my lover and rival, the one who charmed and soothed, the one who taunted, who inspired and destroyed. There was no escape. He would always be there in the shadows-the man with and without whom it was impossible to be happy.

But I had not come on this journey to think of Pietro. The object was to forget him. I must think of Roma.

***

Now I should say something about the events which led up to this moment, how Roma came to be at Lovat Mill and how I met Pietro.

Roma was two years my senior and we were the only children. Both our mother and father had been dedicated archaeologists to whom the discovery of ancient relics was of far greater importance than being parents. They constantly disappeared on "digs" and their attitude toward us was one of vague benevolence which was at least unobtrusive and therefore not unwelcome. Mother had been something of a phenomenon for it was unusual in those days for a woman to take a part in archaeological exploration and it was through her interest in the subject that she met Father. They married, no doubt expecting a life of exploration and discovery; this they started to enjoy until it was interrupted first by the arrival of Roma and then by myself. Our appearances could not exactly have been welcomed but they were determined to do their duty by us and at early ages we were shown pictures of flint and bronze weapons discovered in Britain and were expected to show the interest most young children would have felt for a jigsaw puzzle. It soon became apparent that Roma did feel this interest. My father made excuses for my youth, "It'll come," he said. "After all, Roma's two years older. Look, Caroline, an entire Roman bath. Almost intact. What do you think of that, eh?"

Roma was already their favorite. Not that she set out to be. This overwhelming passion had been born in her, she did not have to pretend. Perhaps rather cynically for one so young, I would try to assess my own value in my parents' eyes. As much as a pieced-together necklace of the Bronze Age? Not quite. Not to be compared with a Roman mosaic floor. A flint from the Stone Age? Perhaps, for they were fairly common.

"I wish," I used to say to Roma, "we had more ordinary parents. I'd like them to be angry sometimes...perhaps they could beat us-for our own good of course which is how all parents excuse themselves. That would be rather fun."

Roma, in her matter-of-fact way, retorted: "Don't be silly. You'd be furious if they beat you. You'd kick and scream. I know you. You only want what you haven't got. When I'm a little older Papa will take me on a dig."

Her eyes shone. She could scarcely wait for the day.

"They're always telling us we must grow up to do useful work."

"Well, so we should."

"But it only means one thing. We have to grow up to be archaeologists."

"We're lucky," stated Roma. She always made statements; she was so sure that what she said was right; in fact she wouldn't have said it until she was sure. That was Roma.

I was the odd one, the frivolous one, who liked to juggle with words, rather than relics of the past, who saw something amusing when she should have been serious. I didn't really fit into my own family.

Roma and I were often at the British Museum, with which my father was connected. We would be told we might amuse ourselves there with the implication that we had been given the entry into some holy place. I remember walking on the sacred stones and pausing, my nose pressed against cold glass, to examine weapons, pottery and jewelry. Roma would be entranced; and later she always wore odd beads, usually of rough hewn turquoise matrix or chunks of amber and badly drilled cornelian-her ornaments always looked prehistoric as though they had been dug up from some long-ago cave. I suppose that was why they appealed to her.

Then I discovered an interest of my very own. From my earliest memories I was interested in sounds. I loved that of trickling water, the sound of fountains playing, the clop-clop of horses' hoofs on the road, the call of the street traders; the wind in the pear tree in our tiny walled garden in the house near the Museum, the shouts of children, the birds in springtime, the sudden bark of a dog. I could even hear music in the dripping of a tap which exasperated others. When I was five years old I could pick out a tune on the piano, and would spend hours perched on the stool, my hands, scarcely emerged from their bracelets of baby fat, exploiting the miracle of sound. "If it keeps her quiet..." shrugged the nannies.

When my parents noticed my passion they were mildly pleased. It was not archaeology of course but it was a worthy substitute; and in view of what happened I am ashamed to say that I was given every opportunity.

Roma had pleased them; even her school holidays were spent with my parents on "digs." I had my music lessons, and stayed at home in charge of our housekeeper to practice the piano. I improved steadily and the best teachers were found for me although we were not well off. Father's salary was just about adequate, for he spent a great deal of his personal income on his excavations. Roma was studying archaeology and our parents used to say that she would go much farther than they had been able to, for discovery added to the knowledge not only of the past but of working methods.

I used to hear them all talking sometimes. It sounded like gibberish to me, and I was no longer an outsider because everyone said that I was going to succeed with my music. My lessons were a joy to me and my teachers. Whenever I see stumbling fingers on the piano I remember those days of discovery-the first gratification, the sheer abandonment to pleasure. I became tolerant toward my family. I understood how they felt about their flints and bronzes. Life had something to offer me. It gave me Beethoven, Mozart, and Chopin.

When I was eighteen I went to Paris to study. Roma was at the university and as her vacations were spent on the "digs" I saw little of her. We had always been good, though never close, friends, our interests being so wide apart.

It was in Paris that I met Pietro, fiery Latin, half French half Italian. Our music master owned a big house not far from the Rue de Rivoli and there we students lived. Madame, his wife, ran the place as a pension which meant that we were all gathered together under one roof.

What happy days when we wandered in the Bois and sat outside the cafes all talking about the future. Every one of us believed that we were the chosen and that our fame would one day resound round the world. Pietro and I were two of the most promising pupils, both ambitious and determined. Our emotions were first stirred by rivalry but we were soon completely fascinated by each other. We were young. Paris in the spring is the

perfect background for lovers and I felt that I had never really lived until this time. The ecstasy and the despair I experienced were the true stuff of life, I told myself. I was sorry for everyone who was not studying music in Paris and in love with a fellow student.

Pietro was the complete and dedicated musician. I knew in my heart that he surpassed me and this made him all the more important to me. He was different from me. I feigned a detachment which I did not feel and although he knew that in the beginning I was as involved, as determined as he, it exasperated while it fascinated him that I could disguise this. He was absolutely serious in his dedication; I could pretend to be flippant about mine. I was rarely ruffled; he was rarely anything else and my serenity was a constant challenge to him, for his moods changed with every hour. He could be inspired to great joy which had its roots in his belief in his own genius; and in no time he could be plunged into despair because he doubted his complete and unassailable gifts. Like so many artists he was completely ruthless and unable to conquer his envy. When I was praised he was, deep down in himself, angry and would seek to say something wounding; but when I did badly and was in need of comfort, he was the most sympathetic of companions. Nobody could have been kinder at such times and it was this absolute understanding, this complete sympathy which made me love him. If only I could have seen him then as clearly as I saw this ghost who was constantly appearing beside me.

We began to bicker. "Excellent, Franz Liszt," I would cry when he played one of the Hungarian Rhapsodies pounding the piano, flinging back his leonine head in a good imitation of the master.

"Envy is the bane of all artists, Caro."

"And one with which you are on familiar terms."

He admitted it. "After all," he pointed out, "excuses must be made for the greatest artist of us all. You will discover that in time."

He was right. I did.

He said I was an excellent interpreter. I could perform gymnastics on the piano, but an artist was a creator.

I would retort, "Was it you, then, who composed the piece you have just played?"

"If the composer could have heard my rendering he would know he had not lived in vain."

"Conceit," I mocked.

"Rather the assurance of the artist, dear Caro."

It was only half in jest. Pietro believed in himself. He lived for music. I was continually teasing; I clung to our rivalry but this may have been because subconsciously I knew that it was that rivalry which had attracted him in the first place. It was not that, loving him, I did not wish him all the success in the world. I was, in fact, ready to give up my ambition for his sake-as I was to prove. But our bickering was a form of love-making; and it sometimes seemed that his desire to show me that he was my superior was an essential part of his love for me.

It is no use making excuses. All Pietro said of me was true. I was an interpreter, a performer of gymnastics on the piano. I was not an artist, for artists do not allow other desires and impulses to divert them. I did not work; at a vital stage of my career I faltered, I failed, and my promise was one of those which were never redeemed; and while I dreamed of Pietro, Pietro was dreaming of success.

My life was suddenly disorganized. Later I blamed what I called ill luck for what happened. My parents had gone to Greece on a dig. Roma was to have gone with them for she was a fully fledged archaeologist by this time, but she wrote to me that she had a commission to go up to the Wall-Hadrian's of course-and that she would be unable to go with our parents. Had she gone I might not have been traveling up to Lovat Mill; for I should never have thought there was anything significant about the place. My parents were both killed in a railway accident on their way to Greece. I went home to the memorial service, and Roma and I were together for a few days in the old house near the British Museum. I was shocked, but poor Roma had been close to our parents and was going to miss them bitterly. She was as ever philosophical. They had died together, she said, and it would have been more tragic if one of them had been left; they had had a happy life. In spite of her sorrow she would make what arrangements had to be made and then go back to work at the Wall. She was practical, precise, she would never become emotionally involved as I was fast becoming. She said we would sell the house and furniture and the proceeds would be divided between us. There was not much but my share would enable me to complete my musical education, and I should be grateful for that.

Death is always disturbing and I went back to Paris feeling dazed and uneasy. I thought a great deal of my parents and was grateful for so much that I had casually accepted. Afterwards I said it was due to my loss that I behaved as I did. Pietro was waiting for me; he was in control now; he was surpassing all the rest of us; he was beginning to put that great gap between us and himself that always divides the real artist from those who are merely talented.

He asked me to marry him. He loved me, he said; he had realized how much while I had been away, and when he had seen me so deeply shocked by my parents' death his great desire was to protect me, to make me happy again. To marry Pietro! To spend my whole life with him! It filled me with elation even while I sadly mourned my parents.

Our music master was aware of what was happening for he watched us all carefully. He had made up his mind at this stage that while I could doubtless go a long way in my musical career, Pietro was going to be one of the blazing stars in the musical sky; and I realize now that he had asked himself whether this marriage was going to help or hinder Pietro in his career. And mine? Naturally a talented player must take second place to a genius.

Madame, his wife, was more romantic. She took an opportunity of talking to me alone.

"So you love him?" she said. "You love him enough to marry him?"

I said fervently that I loved him completely.

"Wait a while. You have suffered a great shock. You should have time to think. Do you understand what this could mean to your career?"

"What should it mean? It will be good for it. Two musicians together."

"Such a musician," she reminded me. "He is like all artists. Greedy. I know him well. He is a very great artist. Maestro believes it is a genius we have there. Your career, my dear, would have to take second place to his, and it is dangerous for an artist to settle for second place. If you marry him you may well be just a good pianist...a very good one without doubt. But perhaps it is goodbye to dreams of the big success, to fame and fortune. Have you thought of this?"

I didn't believe her. I was young and in love. It might be difficult for two ambitious people to live together in harmony; but we would succeed where others had failed.

Pietro laughed when I told him of Madame's warning and I laughed with him. Life was going to be wonderful, he assured me. "We'll work together, Caro, for the rest of our lives."

So I married Pietro and quickly learned that Madame's advice should not have been dismissed so lightly. I didn't care. My ambition had changed. I no longer felt the deep urge to succeed. All I wanted was for Pietro to do so; and for a few months I was certain that I had achieved my purpose in life which was to be with Pietro, to work with Pietro, to live for Pietro. But how could I have been so foolish as to imagine life could be so simply docketed, like papers that were safely filed away under the heading "Married and Lived Happily Ever After"?

Pietro's first concert decided his future; he was acclaimed; and those were wonderful days of achievement, when he went from success to success, but he did not become easier to live with because of this. He demanded service; he was the artist, and I was musician enough to be told of his plans, to listen to his renderings. He had success beyond even his grandiose dreams. I can see now that he was too young to cope with the attention which came his way. It was inevitable that there should be those who smothered him with adulation...women, beautiful and rich. But he always wanted me there in the background, the one to whom he could always return, the one who was a near artist herself, who understood the constant demands of the artistic ego. No one could be as close to him as I was. Besides, in his way he loved me.

Had I been of a different temperament we might have managed. But meekness was a quality I had never possessed. I was not slave material, I pointed out to him, and I was soon bitterly regretting my folly in jettisoning my own career. I was practicing again. Pietro laughed at me. Did I think one could dismiss the Muse and then summon her back when one felt like seeing her again? How right he was. I had had my chance, thrown it away and now would never be anything but a competent pianist.

We quarreled constantly. I told him I would not stay with him. I contemplated leaving him, all the time knowing I never would; and maddeningly so did he. I was anxious for his health because he was squandering it recklessly and I had discovered that he was not strong. I had noticed a certain breathlessness which alarmed me, but when I mentioned this he shrugged it aside.

Pietro was giving concerts in Vienna and Rome as well as in London and Paris and was beginning to be spoken of as one of the greatest pianists of the day. He took all the praise as natural and inevitable; he grew more arrogant; he gloated over everything that was written of him. He liked to see me pasting the cuttings into a book. This was my rightful place in his life-his devoted minion who had thrown aside her own career to further his. But like everything else the book was a mixed blessing, for the mildest criticism could throw him into a fury which would make the veins stand out at his temples and take his breath away.

He was working hard and celebrating the success of his concerts far into the night, and then he would be up early for his hours of practice. He was surrounded by sycophants. It was as though he needed them to keep alive his belief in himself. I was critical, not realizing then how young he was and that it is often more of a tragedy than a blessing when success of this magnitude comes too early. It was an unnatural life...an uneasy life; and during it I learned that I could never be happy with Pietro, yet could not face a life without him.

We came to London for a series of concerts and I had an opportunity of seeing Roma. She had taken rooms near the British Museum where she now worked in between digs.

She was her old self, sturdy, full of common sense, jangling her weird prehistoric bracelets, a chain of uneven rather cloudy-looking cornelians about her neck. She referred to our parents in a sad though rather brisk way, and asked after my own affairs, but of course I did not tell her very much. I could see that she thought it was rather strange of me to have given up a career after having spent so much time and energy on it-and all for the sake of marriage. But Roma had never been one to criticize. She was one of the most sane

and tolerant people I had ever known.

"I'm glad I was here when you came. A week later I should have been away. Going to a place called Lovat Mill."

"A mill?"

"That's merely the name of the place. On the Kent coast...not all that far from Caesar's Camp, so it's not surprising really. We discovered the amphitheater and I'm certain that there's more to be found because as you know these amphitheaters were invariably found outside the cities."

I didn't know but I refrained from remarking on this.

Roma went on. "It means excavating on the local nabob's land. It was quite a bit of trouble getting his permission."

"Really?"

"This Sir William Stacy owns most of the land round about...a difficult gentleman, I do assure you. He made a fuss about his pheasants and his trees. I saw him personally. 'You cannot think your pheasants and trees are more important than history?' I demanded. And in the end I wore him down. He's given his consent for us to excavate on his land. It's a really ancient house...more like a castle. He has plenty of land to spare. So he can allow us this little bit."

I wasn't paying much attention because I was hearing the second movement of the Beethoven No. 4 Piano Concerto, which was what Pietro would be playing that night, and I was asking myself whether or not I should go to the concert. I suffered agonies when he was on a platform, playing each note with him in my mind, terrified that he would stumble. As if he ever would. His only fear would be that he would give something less than his best performance.

"Interesting old place," Roma was saying. "I think Sir William is secretly hoping we may find something of importance on his estate."

She went on talking about the site and what she hoped to do there, now and then throwing in an observation about the people in the big house nearby; and I didn't listen. How was I to know that this was to be Roma's last dig, and that it was imperative to learn all I could about the place.

Death! How it hovers over us when we least suspect it. I have noticed how it will strike in the same direction in quick succession. My parents had died unexpectedly and before that I never gave a thought to death.

Pietro and I left London for Paris. Nothing unusual happened that day, there was no premonition to warn me. Pietro was to play some Hungarian dances and the Rhapsody No. 2. He was strung up-but he always was before a performance. I sat in the front row of the stalls and he was very much aware of me there. I sometimes had the impression that he played for me, as though to say, "You see, you could never have readied this standard. You were only the performer of gymnastics on the piano." And that was how it was that night.

Then he went to his dressing room and collapsed with a heart attack. He did not die immediately, but there were only two days left to us. I was with him every minute and I believe he was conscious of me there for now and then his dark soulful eyes would look into mine, half mocking, half loving as though to say he had scored over me yet again. Then he died and I was free from bondage to mourn forever and long for those

beloved chains.

Roma, like the good sister she was, left her dig and came to Paris for the funeral, which was a grand affair. Musicians from all over the world sent tributes; and many came to pay personal homage. Pietro had never been so famous alive as he was dead. And how he would have reveled in it!

But the shouting and the tumult was over and I was left in an abyss so dark and so desolate that I was in greater despair than I thought possible.

Dear Roma! What a solace she was at that time! She showed so clearly that she would have done anything for me, and I was deeply touched. I had sometimes felt shut out when I had heard her and my parents discussing their work together; I no longer felt that. It was a wonderful comfort to belong, to feel these family ties; and I was grateful to Roma.

She offered me the greatest consolation that she could imagine. "Come to England," she said. "Come down to the dig. Our finds were beyond expectations-one of the best Roman villas outside Verulamium."

I smiled at her and wanted to tell her how I appreciated her. "I shouldn't be of any use," I protested. "Only a hindrance."

"What nonsense!" She was the elder sister again and going to take care of me whether I liked it or not. "In any case, you're coming."

So I went to Lovat Stacy and found comfort in the company of my sister. I was proud of her when she introduced me to friends on the dig, for it was clear what respect they had for her. She would talk to me with that enthusiasm of hers, and because I was so glad of her company and that affection which she had always tried not to show but which was so obviously there, I became mildly interested in the work. These people were so fervent that it was impossible to be unaffected. There was a small cottage, not far from the Roman villa, which Sir William Stacy allowed Roma to use and I shared this with her. It was primitive and had a couple of beds and a table and a few chairs and little else. The lower room was cluttered with archaeological tools-shovels and forks and picks, trowels and bellows. Roma was delighted with the place because as she said, it was so close to the dig and the others were scattered about the place lodging in cottages and at the local inn.

She took me over the finds and showed me the mosaic pavement, which was the delight of her life; she pointed out the geometrical patterns of white chalk and red sandstone; she insisted on my examining the three baths they had discovered which showed, she informed me, that the house had belonged to a nobleman of some wealth. There was the tepidarium, the calidarium and the frigidarium. The Roman terms rolled off her tongue in a kind of ecstasy and I felt alive again as I listened to her enthusiasm.

We went for walks together and I grew closer to my sister than I had ever been before. She took me to Folkestone to show me Caesar's Camp; and I walked with her to Sugar Loaf Hill and St. Thomas's Well at which the pilgrims on their way to the shrine of St. Thomas à Becket had paused to drink. Together we climbed the four hundred feet or so to the summit of Caesar's Camp and I shall never forget her standing there with the wind ruffling her fine hair, her eyes brilliant with delight as she indicated the earthworks and entrenchments. It was a clear day and as I looked across that twenty miles or so of calm translucent sea I could clearly make out the land which was Caesar's Gaul and it was not difficult to imagine the legions on the march.

On another occasion we went to Richborough Castle-one of the most remarkable relics of Roman Britain, Roma told me. "Rutupiae," she called it.

"Claudius made it the principal landing place for his legions crossing from Boulogne. These walls give you a good idea of what a formidable fortress it must have been."

She took great delight in showing me the wine cellars, the granaries and the remains of the temples, and it was impossible not to share in her excitement as she pointed out these wonders to me-the remains of massive walls of Portland stone, the bastion and its postern gate, the subterranean passage.

"You should take up archaeology as a hobby," she told me half wistfully, half hopefully. She really believed that if I would I could not fail to find the compensation in life which I so badly needed. I wanted to tell her that she herself was a compensation; I wanted her to know that her care of me and her affection had helped me so much because she had made me feel that I was not alone.

One could not, however, talk of such things to Roma; she would have cried: "Nonsense!" if I had tried to thank her. But I promised myself that in the future I would see more of her; I would interest myself in her work; I would let her know how glad I was that I had a sister.

And trying to lure me to forgetfulness she set me to help in restoring a mosaic plaque which had been found on the spot. It was specialized work and my task was merely confined to fetching the brushes and solutions which were needed. It was a yellowish disc on which was some sort of picture and the object was to restore that picture to something like it had originally been. It was too delicate a job for the pieces to be moved, Roma told me, but when it was completed it would have a place in the British Museum. I was fascinated by the care and minute attention which went into the restoration and again I was catching some of the excitement as the pieces were fitted together.

And then I discovered Lovat Stacy itself-the big house which dominated the neighborhood and by the grace of whose owner Roma and her friends had been allowed to excavate.

I came upon it suddenly and caught my breath with wonder. The great Gate Tower stood dominating the landscape. This consisted of a central tower flanked on either side by two higher and projecting octagonal towers. As I looked up at these battlements I was impressed by the aggressive aspect of power and strength. Tall narrow windows looked out from the tower. I could see through the gate the high stone walls beyond. Leading to the gateway was a road flanked on both sides by stone walls on which grew moss and lichen. I was enchanted and for the first time since Pietro's death I ceased to think of him for some few minutes and experienced an almost irresistible urge to walk up that road and pass under the gateway to see what was on the other side. I even began to but as I started up the road I saw the carved gargoyles over the gateway-venomous, cruel-looking creatures-and I hesitated. It was almost as though they were warning me to keep out, and I stopped myself in time. One simply did not go walking into people's houses merely because they excited one.

I went back to the cottage full of what I had seen.

"Oh that's Lovat Stacy," explained Roma. "Thank goodness they didn't build the house over the villa."

"What about these Stacys," I asked. "Is there a family?"

"Oh yes."

"I'd like to know about people who live in a house like that."

"My concern was with Sir William-the old man. He's the lord and master, so he was the one who could give the permission we wanted."

Dear Roma. I would get nothing from her. She saw life only in the terms of archaeology.

But I found Essie Elgin.

When I was starting on my musical career I had been sent to a music school and Miss Elgin had been one of my teachers. Taking a walk in the little town of Lovat Mill a mile or so from the dig I met Essie in the High Street. We looked at each other in bewilderment for some seconds and then she said in that Scots accent of hers, "Well, I do believe it's wee Caroline."

"No longer so wee," I told her. "And of course...Miss Elgin."

"And what would ye be doing here?" she wanted to know.

I told her. She nodded gravely when I mentioned Pietro. "A terrible tragedy," she said. "I heard him in London when he was last there. I went up specially for the concert. What a master!"

She looked at me sadly. I knew that she was thinking of me in that regretful way in which teachers think of pupils who have not fulfilled their promises.

"Come into my little house," she said. She pronounced it hoose. "I'll put the kettle on and we'll have a chitter-chatter together."

So I went and she told me how she had come to Lovat Mill because she wanted to be near the sea and was not yet ready to give up her independence. She had a younger sister three or four miles out of Edinburgh who wanted her to go up there and live and she reckoned she would come to it in time; but here she was enjoying what she called her last years of freedom.

"Teaching?" I asked.

She grimaced. "What some of us come to, my dear. I have my little house here and pleasant it is. I give a few lessons to the young ladies of Lovat Mill. It's not much of a living, but it's improved since I have the young ladies of the big house."

"The big house? Do you mean Lovat Stacy?"

"What else? It's our big house and by the grace of God there are the three young ladies to be taught their music."

Essie Elgin was a born gossip and she did not need to be prompted very much. She realized that my own career was a painful subject so she happily chatted away about her pupils from the big house.

"What a place! Always some drama going on up there, I can tell you. And now we'll soon be having the wedding. It's what Sir William wants. He wants to see those two man and wife. Then he'll be happy."

"Which two?" I asked.

"Mr. Napier and young Edith...though she's not old enough I'd say. Seventeen, I believe. Of course some people at seventeen...but not Edith...oh no, not Edith."

"Edith is the daughter of the house?"

"Well, you could call it that in a manner of speaking. She's not Sir William's daughter. Oh, it's a complicated

household with none of the young ladies being related. Edith is Sir William's ward. She's been with the family for the last five years...since she lost her father. Her mother died when she was quite a baby and she was brought up by housekeepers and servants. Her father was a great friend of Sir William's. He had a big estate over Maidstone way...but it was all sold when he died and everything went to Edith. She's an heiress in a big way and that's why...Well, her father made Sir William her guardian and she came to Lovat Stacy when he died and lived there as though she were Sir William's daughter. Now of course he's brought Napier home to marry her."

"Napier would be...?"

"Sir William's son. Banished! Ah, there's a story for you. Then there's Allegra. Some connection of Sir William's, I've heard. She speaks of him as her grandfather. Proper little tartar and gives herself airs. Mrs. Lincroft, the housekeeper, runs the place and she is Alice's mother. There are my three young ladies: Edith, Allegra, and Alice. For although Alice is only the housekeeper's daughter, she is allowed to join in their lessons-and so she comes to me, too. She's being educated as a proper little lady."

"And this...Napier?" I said. "What a strange name!"

"Oh, some family name. They're rare ones for family names...families who have been joined with theirs in marriage, so I heard. His is an odd story. I've never quite learned the wrongs and rights of it, but his brother Beaumont died...and Beaumont's another family name. He was killed, and Napier was blamed. He went away and now he has come back to marry Edith. It's a condition so I gather."

"How was he to blame?"

"People don't talk much round here about the Stacys," she said regretfully. "They're frightened of Sir William. He's a bit of a tartar too and most of them are his tenants. Hard as nails, they say. Must have been, to have sent Napier away. I'd like to know the ins and outs of that story but I can't speak to the young ladies about it."

"I was very attracted by the house. There was something menacing about it. It looked so beautiful from a distance and when I was close to that great gateway...ugh..."

Essie laughed. "You're letting your imagination run away with you," she said. Then she asked me to play something for her and I sat down at the piano and it was like old times when I was young, before I had gone abroad to study, before I had met Pietro, before I threw away my chance.

"Aye," she said, "ye've a pretty touch. What do you plan?"

I shook my head at her.

"Oh come, lassie," she said. "That's nae the way. You go back to that Paris school and see whether you can take up where you left off."

"Where I left off...before my marriage?"

She didn't answer. Perhaps she knew that although I was a competent pianist, although I could be a good teacher, I lacked the divine spark. Pietro had taken it from me; no, if I had had it I should never have chosen marriage instead of a career.

Then finally she said: "Think about it...and come again soon."

I walked back to our little cottage and thought about Essie and the old days and the future; but every now and then I would see the big house in my mind's eye, populated by vague and shadowy figures who were only names to me, and yet seem to have some life of their own.

I remember those days vividly; sitting in the cottage watching the mosaic emerge from under the skillful fingers of the restorers and sometimes strolling over to Essie's house for a cup of tea and an hour or so at the piano. I think Essie wanted to warn me to make an effort to pick up the threads; she was telling me that I did not want to find myself in a position such as hers.

One day she said to me: "The wedding's on Saturday. Would you like to see it?"

So I went to the church and saw Napier and Edith married. They came down the aisle together-she fair and fragile, he lean and dark, though I noticed his blue eyes which were startling in his brown face. I was seated at the back of the church with Essie as they went by and the organ was playing Mendelssohn's wedding march. I felt a strange emotion as they passed-almost a premonition I might have said. But it was not that. Perhaps it was because I sensed the incongruity of the match; they did not belong together, those two, and it was obvious. The girl looked so young, so delicate and could I really have seen the apprehension in her face? I thought: She is afraid of him. And I remembered the day Pietro and I had married, how we had laughed together, how we had teased each other, and how we had loved. Poor child, I thought. And he had not looked too happy either. What was his expression? One of resignation, boredom...cynicism?

"Edith makes a pretty bride," said Essie. "And she'll continue with her lessons after the honeymoon. Sir William wants her to."

"Really?"

"Oh yes. Sir William's all for music...now. Although there was a time when he wouldn't have it in the house. And Edith's got a pretty talent. Oh nothing great, but she plays well and it's a shame to drop it."

I went back with Essie for a cup of tea and she talked about the young ladies at Lovat Stacy and their music...how Edith was good, Allegra lazy, and Alice painstaking.

"Poor little Alice, she feels she has to be. You see, having so much given to her, she has to take advantage of it."

Roma agreed with Essie that I should go back to Paris and carry on with my music. "I can see," she said, "that it's the right thing for you to finish your studies. Though I'm not entirely sure of Paris. After all it was there..." She fingered her turquoises almost impatiently and decided not to mention my marriage. "If you feel it's impossible...we could work out something else."

"Oh Roma," I cried, "you are so good. I don't know how to tell you what a help you've been."

"Nonsense!" she retorted gruffly.

"I'm realizing how good it is to have a sister."

"But naturally we stick together in times like these. You must come here more often."

I smiled and kissed her. Then I went back to Paris. It was a foolish thing to have done. I should have known that I could not endure to be in a place which was so full of memories of Pietro. It only showed how different Paris was without him, and that it was stupid of me to think that I could start all over again. Nothing could be the same again because the foundations on which I must build my future would be the past.

How right Pietro was when he had said that one did not beckon the Muse and expect her to return after one had deserted her.

I had been in Paris some three months when news came that Roma had disappeared.

***

It was extraordinary. The dig was finished. They were preparing to pack up and leave within a few days. Roma had been superintending the departure in the morning, and it was evening before she was missed. There was no sign of her. It was as though she had just walked out into nowhere.

It was a great mystery. She had left no note but had simply disappeared. I came back to England feeling bewildered, melancholy and deeply depressed. I kept remembering how good she had been to me, how she had tried to help me over my grief. I had been telling myself during those difficult weeks in Paris that I would always have Roma and that, through my sorrow, I had discovered a new relationship with my sister.

I was interviewed by the police. It was thought that Roma had lost her memory and might be wandering about the country; then it was suggested that she might have taken a swim and been drowned, for the coast was dangerous at that point. I clung to the first suggestion because it was more comforting, though I could not imagine Roma in a state of amnesia. Each day I waited for news. None came.

Some of her friends volunteered the suggestion that she might have had sudden news of a secret project and gone off to Egypt or somewhere like that. I tried to force myself to accept this comforting theory, but I knew it was not like precise and practical Roma. Something had prevented her from letting me know what had happened. Something? What could have prevented her but death?

I told myself that I was obsessed by death because I had lost my parents and Pietro in such a short time. I could not lose Roma too.

I was wretchedly unhappy and after a while I went back to Paris to settle up there because I knew I couldn't stay any longer. I returned to London, took rooms in a house in Kensington and advertised that I was a teacher of the pianoforte.

Perhaps I was not a good teacher; perhaps I was impatient with the mediocre. After all I had had dreams for myself, and had been Pietro Verlaine's wife. I was not earning my keep. My money was dwindling in an alarming way. Each day I hoped for news of Roma. I felt helpless because I did not know how to set about finding my sister. And then came my opportunity.

Essie wrote that she was coming to London and would like to see me.

I saw that she was excited as soon as she arrived; she was a born schemer for other people; I never remembered her scheming very much for herself.

"I'm leaving Lovat Mill," she said. "I haven't been so well lately and I think it's time I went to my sister in Scotland."

"That's a long way," I replied.

"Oh aye, a long way; but what I've come to tell you is this. How would you like to go down there?"

"To go..." I stammered.

"To Lovat Stacy. To teach the girls. Now listen. I've had a talk with Sir William. He was a wee bit put out when I told him of my plans. You see he wants Edith to continue with her lessons...and the others too. And then they used to have musical evenings years ago, by all accounts, and he would like to revive them now that there's a young bride in the house. It was his idea that he should have a resident teacher who would play for his benefit and that of his guests, as well as teach the girls now and then. He broached this subject with me when I told him I was going and I thought at once of you and said that I knew the widow of Pietro Verlaine who was a clever musician herself. Now if you're agreeable he would like you to write to him and some arrangement could be made."

I felt breathless. "Wait a moment!" I said.

"Now you're going to be a coy young lady and say ‘This is too sudden.' Some of the best things in life are; and you have to make up your mind suddenly or lose them. If you say no, Sir William will be advertising for a resident teacher for the girls, because once I'd put the idea to him that you might come he was eager."

I was seeing it so clearly: the dig; the little cottage; the big house and those two coming down the aisle together. And Roma of course...Roma urging me not to forget her.

I said abruptly: "Do you believe that Roma is alive?"

Her face puckered. She turned her head away and said: "I...I don't believe she would have gone away without telling someone she was going."

"Then she was spirited away...or she's somewhere where she can't let us know. I want to find out...I must."

Miss Elgin nodded.

"I didn't tell Sir William that you are her sister. He's annoyed about the whole affair. There was too much publicity. I've heard it said that he declares he should never have allowed them to excavate there. That brought enough limelight and when your sister disappeared..." She shrugged her shoulders. "So I didn't say you were the sister of Roma Brandon, I merely told him you were Caroline Verlaine, widow of the great pianist."

"So I should go there...incognito as far as my connection with Roma is concerned?"

"I honestly don't believe he'd want you if he knew. He'd think you might have some reason for going there other than teaching."

"If I went," I said, "he'd be right."

I wanted to think about it and Essie and I walked together in Kensington Gardens where Roma and I used to sail our boats when we were children. That night I dreamed of Roma; she was standing in the Round Pond holding out her hands to me and the water kept rising higher and higher. She called, "Do something, Caro."

It may have been this dream which made me definitely decide that I would go to Lovat Stacy.

I sold the few pieces of furniture I possessed to the landlady in whose house I rented my two rooms. I put my piano in store and packed my bags.

I had at last found a purpose in life. Pietro was lost to me forever; but I would try to find Roma.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

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