



The Secret Woman (Casablanca Classics)

By Victoria Holt

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"When?"

"Perhaps sooner than you think."

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Editorial Review

From the Inside Flap

To all appearances, Anna Brett was a quiet, capable young woman whose only ambition was to carry on the profitable antiques business bequeathed her by a spinster aunt. And so she was -- until the memory of a cherished moment with a blue-eyed stranger suddenly returned to haunt her with savage intensity. It was then Anna discovered the secret woman who waited within her -- impetuous, daring . . . and dangerous.

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.

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One

When my Aunt Charlotte died suddenly many people believed that I had killed her and that if it had not been for Nurse Loman's evidence at the inquest, the verdict would have been one of murder by some person or persons unknown; there would have been a probing into the dark secrets of the Queen's House, and the truth would have come out.

"That niece of hers obviously had the motive," it was said.

The "motive" was Aunt Charlotte's possessions which on her death became mine. But how different everything was from what it appeared to be!

Chantel Loman, who had become my friend during the months she lived with us at the Queen's House, laughed at the gossips.

"People must have drama. If it isn't there they invent it. Sudden death is manna from Heaven. Of course they talk. Take no notice of them. I don't."

She did not have the same need to do so, I pointed out to her.

She laughed at me. "You're always so logical!" she said. "Why, Anna, I do believe that if those wicked old gossips had had their wish and you had stood in the dock you would have got the better of the judge as well as the jury and counsel for the prosecution. You can look after yourself."

If only it were true! But Chantel did not know of those sleepless nights when I lay in my bed making plans, trying to work out how I could dispose of everything and start a new life in a new place and so free myself from this haunting nightmare. But in the morning it would be different. Practical considerations forced themselves on me. I could not go away; it was not financially possible. Little did the gossips know the true state of affairs. Moreover I was not going to be a coward and run away. As long as one was innocent what did it matter what the world thought of one?

A foolish paradox, I told myself immediately, and an untrue one. The innocent frequently suffer when they are suspected of guilt, and it is necessary not only to be innocent but to prove that one is.

But I could not run away; so I put on what Chantel called my mask and turned a face of cold indifference to the world. No one was going to know how deeply I cared about the slander.

I tried to see everything objectively. In fact I could not have endured those months if I had not looked upon what happened as an unpleasant fantasy like a drama being played out on a stage, the chief characters being the victim and the suspect-Aunt Charlotte and myself-and in the minor roles, Nurse Chantel Loman, Dr. Elgin, Mrs. Morton the cook-housekeeper, Ellen the maid, and Mrs. Buckle who came in to dust the cluttered rooms. I was trying to convince myself that it had not really happened and one morning I should wake up to find it was nothing but a nightmare.

So I was not logical but foolish and even Chantel did not know how vulnerable. I dared not look back and I dared not look forward. Yet when I saw my reflection in the mirror I was aware of the changes in my face. I was twenty-seven and looked it; before, I had appeared young for my age. I imagined myself at thirty-seven...forty-seven...still living in the Queen's House, getting older and older, haunted by the ghost of Aunt Charlotte; and the gossip would go on, never to be entirely forgotten and those not yet born would one day say: "That's old Miss Brett. There was some scandal long ago. I never heard quite what. I believe she murdered someone."

It must not come to that. There were days when I promised myself I would escape, but the old stubbornness returned. I was a soldier's daughter. How many times had my father said to me: "Never turn your back on trouble. Always stand and face it."

That was what I was trying to do when once more Chantel came to my rescue.

But the story begins before that.

When I was born my father was a Captain in the Indian Army; he was Aunt Charlotte's brother; there was a great deal of the soldier in her. People are unpredictable. They appear to conform to patterns. Often you can say he or she is such and such a type, but people are rarely types, or not completely so. They conform up to a point and then they diverge wildly. So it was with both my father and Aunt Charlotte. Father was dedicated to his profession. The Army was more important than anything in the world; in fact little else existed for him. My mother often said that he would have run the household like a military camp if she had let him and treated us all as though we were his "men." He quoted Queen's Regulations at breakfast, she said mockingly; and he would grin sheepishly at her for she was his divergence. They had met when he was on his way home on leave from India. She told me about it in what I called her butterfly way. She never kept to the point and she would stray off so that one had to guide her back to the original theme if one were interested in it. Sometimes it was more intriguing to let her run on.

But I was interested to hear about my parents' meeting so I kept her to it.

"Moonlit nights on deck, darling. You've no idea how romantic... Dark skies and the stars like jewels...and the music and the dancing. The foreign ports and those fantastic bazaars. This heavenly bracelet... Oh the day we bought that..."

She would have to be led back. Yes, she had been dancing with the First Officer and she had noticed the tall soldier, so aloof, and she had made a bet that she would make him dance with her. Of course she had and they were married two months later in England.

"Your Aunt Charlotte was furious. Did she think the poor man was a eunuch?"

Her conversation was light and frothy-racy even. She fascinated me as she must have fascinated my father. I was far more like him, I feared, than like her.

In those early days I lived with them though I was more often in the company of my ayah than in theirs. There are vague memories of heat and brilliantly colored flowers, of dark-skinned people washing their clothes in the river. I remember riding in an open carriage with my ayah past the cemetery on the hill where I was told the bodies of the dead were left out in the open that they might become part of the earth and air again. I remember the wicked-looking vultures high up in the trees. They made me shiver.

There came the time when I must return to England and I traveled back with my parents, and myself experienced those tropical nights at sea when the stars seemed to have been placed like jewels on dark blue velvet as though to show off their brilliance. I heard the music and saw the dancing; and for me everything was dominated by my mother, the most beautiful being in the world, with her long draperies, her dark hair piled high on her head, and her incessant, inconsequential chatter.

"Darling, it will only be for a short time. You have to be educated, and we have to go back to India. But you'll stay with Auntie Charlotte." It was typical that she should call her Auntie. Aunt Charlotte was always Aunt to me. "She'll love you darling, because you're named after her-well, partly. They wanted Charlotte for you, but I wasn't going to have my darling daughter called that. It would remind me of her..." She caught herself up sharply, remembering she was trying to put Aunt Charlotte in a good light. "People always like those who have their names. 'But not Charlotte,' I said, 'That's too severe...' So you were Anna Charlotte to be known as Anna and so avoid having two Charlottes in the family. Oh, where was I? Your Auntie Charlotte... Yes, darling, you have to go to school, my precious, but there are holidays. You can't come all the way out to India in the holidays, can you? So Auntie Charlotte will have you at the Queen's House. Now doesn't that sound grand? Queen Elizabeth slept there, I believe. That's where it gets its name. And then...in no time...my goodness how time flies, you'll be finished with school and you'll come out to us. I can't wait, my darling, for the day. What fun I shall have launching my daughter." Again that attractive grimace which I believe is called a moue. "It will be my compensation for getting old."

She could make anything sound attractive by the way she spoke of it. She could dismiss years with a flick of the hand. She made me see not school and Aunt Charlotte but the days ahead when the ugly duckling I was would be transformed into the swan, looking exactly like my mother.

I was eight years old when I saw the Queen's House for the first time. The cab which had brought us from the station took us through streets very different from those of Bombay. The people looked sedate, the houses imperious. Here and there was a touch of green in the gardens, such green as I had not seen in India, deep and cool; there was a light drizzle in the air. We caught a glimpse of the river for the town of Langmouth was situated on the estuary of the River Lang and it was for this reason that it had become the busy port it was. Scraps of my mother's chatter lived on in my mind. "What a big ship! Look darling. I suppose that belongs to those people...what's their name, darling?-those rich and powerful people who own half Langmouth and half of England for that matter?" And my father's voice: "You mean the Creditons, my dear. They do in fact own a very prosperous shipping line but you exaggerate when you say they own half Langmouth, although it is true that Langmouth owes a certain part of its growing prosperity to them."

The Creditons! The name stayed with me.

"They would have a name like that," said my mother. "The creditable Creditons."

My father's lips twitched as they did for my mother; it meant he wanted to laugh but felt it was undignified for a Major to do so. He had gained his majority since my birth and extra dignity with it. He was unapproachable, stern, honorable; and I was as proud of him as I was of my mother.

And so we came to the Queen's House. The carriage drew up before a high red brick wall in which was a wrought-iron gate. It was an exciting moment because standing there looking up at that ancient wall one had no idea what one would find on the other side. And when the gate was opened and we went through it and it shut behind us, the feeling came to me that I had stepped into another age. I had shut out Victorian Langmouth, made prosperous by the industrious Creditons, and had stepped back three hundred years in time.

The garden ran down to the river. It was well kept, though not elaborate and not large either-I should say perhaps three quarters of an acre at most. There were two lawns divided by a path of crazy paving, and on the lawns were shrubs which would doubtless flower in spring or summer; at that time of year they were draped with spiders' webs on which globules of moisture glistened. There was a mass of Michaelmas daisies-like lovely mauve stars, I thought them-and reddish and gold-colored chrysanthemums. The fresh smell of damp earth, grass, and green foliage and the faint scent of the flowers was so different from the heavy frangipani perfume of the blooms which grew in such profusion in the hot steamy Indian air.

A path led to the house, which was of three stories-wider than it was tall; it was of the same red brick as the wall. There was an iron-studded door and beside it a heavy iron bell. The windows were latticed, and I believed that I was aware of a certain air of menace, but that may have been because I knew that I was to be left here in the charge of Aunt Charlotte while my parents went away to their gay and colorful life. That was the truth. There was no warning. I did not believe in such things.

Even my mother though was a little subdued on that occasion; but Aunt Charlotte had the power to subdue anyone.

My father-who was not nearly such a martinet as he liked to pretend-may have been aware of my fear; it may have occurred to him that I was very young to be left to the mercy of school, Aunt Charlotte and the Queen's House. But it was no unusual fate. It was happening to young people all the time. It was, as he told me before he left me, a worthwhile experience because it taught one to be self-reliant, to face up to life, to stand on one's own feet; he had a stock of clichés to meet occasions like this.

He tried to warn me. "This is reckoned to be a very interesting house," he told me. "You'll find your Aunt Charlotte an interesting woman. She runs this business...she's clever at it. She buys and sells valuable old furniture. She'll tell you all about it. That's why she's got this interesting old house. She keeps the furniture she buys here and people come here to see it. She couldn't keep it all in her shop. And of course this sort of business is not ordinary business, so it is quite proper for Aunt Charlotte to do this. It is not as though she were selling butter or sugar over a counter."

I was puzzled by these social differences but too overawed by my new experiences to bother with such trifles.

He pulled the rope, the old bell clanged and after a wait of some minutes the door was opened by Ellen who dropped a flustered curtsy and bade us come in.

We stepped into a dark hall; odd shapes loomed up all about us and I saw that it was not so much furnished as full of furniture. There were several grandfather clocks and some elaborate ones in ormolu; their ticking was very audible in the silence. The ticking of clocks was something I would always associate with the Queen's House. I noticed two Chinese cabinets, some chairs and several small tables, a bookcase and desk. They were simply put there, not arranged.

Ellen had run off and a woman was coming toward us. I thought at first she was Aunt Charlotte. I should have known that her neat white cap and black bombazine dress indicated the housekeeper.

"Ah, Mrs. Morton," said my father who knew her well. "Here we are with my daughter."

"Madam is in her sitting room," said Mrs. Morton. "I will inform her that you have arrived."

"Pray do," said my father.

My mother looked at me. "Isn't it fascinating?" she whispered, half fearfully, which told me she didn't think so but wanted me to. "All these priceless, precious things! Just look at that escritoire! I'll bet it belonged to the King of the Barbarines."

"Beth," murmured my father in indulgent reproof.

"And look at the claws on the arms of that chair. I'm sure it means something. Just think, darling, you may discover. I'd love to know all about these lovely things."

Mrs. Morton had returned, hands neatly folded over bombazine stomach.

"Madam wishes you to come at once to her sitting room."

We ascended a staircase lined with tapestries and a few oil paintings which led us straight into a room which seemed to be filled with more furniture; another room led from this and from that another and this third was Aunt Charlotte's sitting room.

And there she was-tall, gaunt, looking I thought like my father dressed up as a woman; her mid-brown hair with streaks of gray in it was pulled straight back from her big strong face and made into a knot at the back of her head. She wore a tweed skirt and jacket and a severe olive green blouse, the same color as her eyes. I knew afterward that they took their color from her clothes; and as she usually wore grays and that dark shade of green they seemed that tinge too. She was an unusual woman; she might have lived on her small income in some quiet country town, genteelly calling on her friends, leaving cards, perhaps having her own carriage, helping to organize church bazaars, doing charity work, and entertaining in a modest way. But no. Her love of beautiful furniture and porcelain was an obsession. Just as my father had stepped out of line to marry my mother, so had she with her antiques. She had become a businesswoman-a strange phenomenon in this Victorian age: a woman who actually bought and sold and who knew so much about her chosen subject that she could compete with men. Later I was to see her hard face light up at the sight of some rare piece and I have heard her talk with passion about the finials on a Sheraton cabinet.

But everything was so bewildering to me on that day. The cluttered house was not like a house at all: I could not imagine it as a home. "Of course," said my mother, "your true home is with us. This is just where you will stay during holidays. And in a few years' time..."

But I could not think of the passing of the years as lightly as she could.

We did not stay overnight on that occasion, but went straight down to my school in Sherborne, where my parents put up at a hotel nearby and they stayed there until they returned to India. I was touched by this because I knew that in London my mother would have led the kind of life that she loved. "We wanted you to know we weren't far off if school became a little trying just at first," she told me. I liked to think that her divergence was her love for my father and myself, for one would not have expected a butterfly to be capable of so much love and understanding.

I think I began to hate Aunt Charlotte when she criticized my mother.

"Featherbrained," she said. "I could never understand your father."

"I could understand him," I retorted firmly. "I could understand anyone. She is different from other people." And I hoped my withering look conveyed that "other people" meant Aunt Charlotte.

The first year at school was the hardest to endure, but the holidays were more so. I even made plans to stow away on a ship that was going to India. I made Ellen, who accompanied me on my walks, take me down to the docks where I would gaze longingly at the ships and wonder where they were going.

"That's a ship of the Lady Line," Ellen would tell me proudly. "She belongs to the Creditons." And I would gaze at her while Ellen pointed out her beauties to me. "That's a clipper," she would say. "One of the fastest ships that ever sailed. It goes out and brings back wool from Australia and tea from China. Oh, look at her. Did you ever see such a beautiful barque!"

Ellen prided herself on her knowledge. She was a Langmouth girl and I remembered that Langmouth owed its prosperity to the Creditons; moreover she had an added distinction: her sister Edith was a housemaid up at Castle Crediton. And she would take me to see that-but only from the outside of course-before I was many days older.

Because I dreamed of running away to India I was fascinated by the ships. It seemed romantic that they should roam round the world loading and unloading their cargoes-bananas and tea, oranges and wood pulp for making paper in the big factory which the Creditons had founded and which, Ellen told me, provided work for many people of Langmouth. There was the grand new dock which had been recently opened by Lady Crediton herself. There was a "one," said Ellen. She had been beside Sir Edward in everything he had done and you would hardly have expected that from a lady, would you?

I replied that I would expect anything from the Creditons.

Ellen nodded approval. I was beginning to know something of the place in which I lived. Oh, it was a sight she told me to see a ship come into harbor or sail away-to see the white canvas billowing in the wind and the gulls screaming and whirling around. I began to agree with her. There were Ladies-she told me-Mermaids and Amazons in the Lady line. It was Sir Edward's tribute to Lady Crediton, who had stood with him all the time and had a business head which was remarkable for a woman.

"It's really very romantic," said Ellen.

Of course it was. The Creditons were romantic. They were clever, rich, and in fact superhuman, I pointed out.

"And don't you be saucy," said Ellen to that.

She showed me Castle Crediton. It was built high on the cliff facing out to the sea. An enormous gray stone fortress, with its battlemented towers and a keep, it was just like a castle. Wasn't this a little ostentatious, I asked, because people did not build castles now, so this was not a real castle. It had only stood there for fifty years. It was a little deceitful, wasn't it, to make it look as though the Normans had built it?

Ellen looked about her furtively as though she expected me to be struck dumb for uttering such blasphemy. It was clear that I was a newcomer to Langmouth and had not yet discovered the power of the Creditons.

But Ellen it was who interested me in Langmouth and to be interested in Langmouth meant to be interested in the Creditons. Ellen had heard tales from her parents. Once...not very long ago, Langmouth had not been the grand town it was today. There was no Theatre Royal; there were no elegant houses built on the cliffs overlooking the bridge. Many of the streets were narrow and cobbled and it wasn't safe to wander out to the

docks. Of course the fine Edward Dock had not been built then. But in the old days the ships used to sail out to Africa to capture slaves. Ellen's father could remember their being auctioned in the sheds on the docks. Gentlemen came all the way from the West Indies to bargain for them and take them off to work on their sugar plantations. That was all over. It was very different now. Sir Edward Crediton had come along; he had modernized the place; he had started the Lady Line; and although Langmouth's very situation and its excellent harbor had given it some significance, it could never have been the town it was today but for the magnificent Creditons.

It was Ellen who made life bearable for me during that first year. I never could be fond of Mrs. Morton; she was too much like Aunt Charlotte. Her face seemed like a door that was kept tightly shut; her eyes were windows-too small to show what was behind them and they were obscurely curtained-inscrutable; she did not want me in the house. I quickly learned that. She complained of me to Aunt Charlotte. I had brought in mud from the garden on my boots, I had left the soap in the water so that half the tablet was wasted (Aunt Charlotte was very parsimonious and hated spending money except to buy antiques), I had broken the china teacup which was a part of the set. Mrs. Morton never complained to me; she was icily polite. Had she raged at me or accused me to my face I could have liked her better. Then there was plump Mrs. Buckle who mixed the beeswax and turpentine, polished the precious pieces and kept a watch for that ever threatening enemy: woodworm. She was talkative and I found her company as stimulating as that of Ellen.

I began to have odd fancies about the Queen's House. I pictured how it must have looked years ago when it had been treated as a house. In the hall there would have been an oak chest, a refectory table and a suit of armor at the foot of the beautiful staircase. The walls would have been decorated with the family portraits, not the occasional picture, and those enormous tapestries which were hung irrespective of color-sometimes one over another. I used to fancy that the house resented what had been done to it. All those chairs and tables, cabinets, bureaus, and clocks ticking away sometimes fussily as though exasperated with their surroundings, sometimes angrily so that they sounded ominous.

I told Ellen that they said "Hurry up! Hurry up!" sometimes to remind us that the time was passing and we were growing older every day.

"As if we need reminding of that!" cried Mrs. Buckle, three chins shaking with laughter.

Ellen jerked a finger at me. "Missing her Ma and Pa, that's what. Waiting for the time when they come and get her."

I agreed. "But when I haven't done my holiday task they remind me of that. Time can remind you of quickness and slowness but it always seems to warn."

"The things she says!" commented Ellen.

And Mrs. Buckle's plump form shivered like a jelly with secret mirth.

But I was fascinated by the Queen's House and by Aunt Charlotte. She was no ordinary woman any more than the Queen's House was an ordinary house. At first I was obsessed by the idea that the house was a living personality-and that it hated us all because we were in the conspiracy to make it merely a store for goods-precious as they were.

"The ghosts of people who lived here are angry because Aunt Charlotte has made their home unrecognizable," I told Ellen and Mrs. Buckle.

"Lord a' mercy!" cried Mrs. Buckle.

Ellen said it wasn't right to talk of such things.

But I insisted on talking. "One day," I said, "the ghosts of the house will rise up and something fearful will happen."

That was in the first months. Later my feelings toward Aunt Charlotte changed and although I could never love her, I respected her.

Practical in the extreme, down to earth, unromantic, she did not see the Queen's House as I saw it. To her it was rooms within walls-ancient it was true and the sole virtue in this was that it made an appropriate setting for her pieces. There was only one room in the house which she allowed to keep its character and she had even come to this decision for business reasons. This was the room in which Queen Elizabeth was reputed to have slept. There was even the Elizabethan bed, reputed to be the bed itself; and as a concession to this legend-if legend it was-everything in the room was Tudor. It was for business, she said hurriedly. Many people came to see this room; it put them in the right "mood"; they were fascinated and because of this prepared to pay the price she asked.

I often went to that room and found some comfort there. I used to say to myself: "The past is on my side...against Aunt Charlotte. The ghosts feel my sympathy." That was my fanciful notion. And during those months I needed sympathy.

I used to stand in that room and touch the bedposts and think of the famous Tilbury speech which my father had often quoted to me. "I know I have the body of a weak, feeble woman; but I have the heart and stomach of a king-and of a king of England too..." And then I was as certain that I would come through this unhappy period as she had been of victory over the Spaniards.

So it was understandable that the house offered me compensation and I began to feel that it was alive. I became familiar with its night noises-the sudden inexplicable creak of a floorboard, the rattle of a window, and how when the wind moaned through the branches of the chestnut tree it sounded like whispering voices.

There were days when Aunt Charlotte went away to buy. She would visit sales at old houses sometimes quite far away and after she returned we would be more cluttered than ever. Aunt Charlotte had a shop in the center of the town and there she displayed certain pieces but most of the goods were in the house and strangers were constantly visiting us.

Miss Beringer spent all her time at the shop to allow Aunt Charlotte to absent herself, but Aunt Charlotte said the woman was a fool and had little appreciation of values. That was not true; it merely meant that Miss Beringer lacked Aunt Charlotte's knowledge. But Aunt Charlotte was so efficient herself that she thought most people fools.

For at least a year I was what Aunt Charlotte would call "a cross," in other words a burden; but that changed suddenly. It was a table which caught my attention. I was suddenly excited merely to look at it and I was crouching on the floor examining the carvings on the legs when Aunt Charlotte discovered me. She squatted on the floor beside me.

"Rather a fine example," she said gruffly.

"It's French, isn't it?" I asked.

Her lips turned up at the corners which was as near to a smile as she could get.

She nodded. "It's unsigned but I believe it's the work of René Dubois. I thought at first his father Jacques was responsible for it, but I fancy it's a year or two later. That green and gold lacquer on the oak carcass, you see! And look at those bronze mounts."

I looked and found myself touching it reverently.

"It would be the end of the eighteenth century," I hazarded.

"No, no." She shook her head impatiently. "Fifty years early. Mid-eighteenth century."

After that our relationship changed. She would sometimes call me and say: "Here! What do you think of this? What do you notice about it?" At first I felt a certain desire to score over her, to show her that I knew something about her precious goods; but later it became a great interest to me and I began to understand the difference between the furniture of various countries and to recognize period by certain features.

One day Aunt Charlotte went so far as to admit: "You know as much as that fool Beringer." But that was when she was particularly incensed by that long suffering lady.

But as far as I was concerned the Queen's House took on a new fascination. I began to know certain pieces, to regard them as old friends. Mrs. Buckle dusting with deft but careful hands said: "Here, are you going to be another Miss Charlotte Brett, Miss Anna?"

That startled me; I felt then as though I wanted to run away.

It was one morning in the middle of the summer holidays, about four years after my parents had brought me to England, when Ellen came to my room and told me that Aunt Charlotte wished to see me at once. Ellen looked scared and I asked if anything was wrong.

"I've not been told, miss," said Ellen, but I was aware that she knew something.

I made my way-one made one's way in the Queen's House-to Aunt Charlotte's sitting room.

There she was, seated with papers before her, for she used the place as her office. Her desk on that day was a sturdy refectory table-sixteenth-century English, of a type that owed its charm to its age rather than its beauty. She sat very upright on a rather heavy chair of the Yorkshire-Derbyshire type of carved and turned oak, of much later period than the table, but as strong and sturdy. She chose these strong pieces for use while they were in the house. The rest of the office did not match the table and chair. An exquisite piece of tapestry hung on the wall. I knew it to be of the Flemish school, and guessed it would not be there for long; and crowded together were heavy oak pieces from Germany side by side with a delicate French eighteenth-century commode and two pieces in the Boulle tradition. I noticed the change in myself. I could sum up the contents of a room, date them and note their qualities even while I was eager to know what this summons meant.

"Sit down," said Aunt Charlotte, and her expression was more grim than usual.

I sat and she went on in her brusque way. "Your mother is dead. It was cholera."

How like her to shatter my future with two brief sentences. The thought of reunion had been like a lifebelt, which had prevented my being submerged in the misery of my loneliness. And she said it calmly like that. Dead...of cholera.

She looked at me fearfully; she hated any display of emotion.

"Go to your room. I'll send Ellen up with some hot milk."

Hot milk! Did she think that could console me?

"I've no doubt," she said, "your father will be writing to you. He will have made arrangements."

I hated her then, which was wrong for she was breaking the news in the only way she considered possible. She was offering me hot milk and my father's arrangements to console me for the loss of my beloved mother.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

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