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A popular author's thrilling new serial of Queen Anne's day

# THE SILKEN SECRET

by Geoffrey Trease

## I. A dark night in the city

IT was a blustery wet night, late in August and late in the reign of Queen Anne, when mystery entered the respectable house of Mr. Cogwell, a London merchant.

It was the first and last time mystery ever crossed that threshold to trouble a quiet and sober family. Even so, mystery arrived in a most respectable manner—in a sedan-chair, that is to say, carried by two decent, honest chairmen, almost as well-known to the city as the city was well-known to them.

But first, a mere five minutes before, came the knocking of an earlier caller.

Mr. Cogwell's old serving-man, Thomas, crossed the candle-lit hall and opened the door cautiously upon the dripping darkness of Salisbury Square.

One could not be too careful, these days, though the city was not perhaps quite as lawless as its western outskirts. Houses in Bond Street, Thomas had heard, were broken into openly in daylight. Walking down Piccadilly after dark, you were in greater danger from armed footpads than you were from highwaymen on Hounslow Heath. Ladies were afraid to go to Drury Lane opera, so perilous were the narrow, dimly-lit streets.

THOMAS, however, had been expecting a knock on the door, so he opened it without too much nervousness. Framed in the doorway was a boy of about 14, decently clad in blue coat and breeches and a fawn waistcoat, though his stockings and buckled shoes were mud-splashed from the streets. He had an alert, fresh-coloured face, and he spoke well, though with a countrified ring.

"Please, is this where Mr. Charles Mount is staying?"

Thomas peered down. "It is, my lad. But Mr. Mount is out."

The boy looked surprised. "Oh! Then I must have passed him. I did take a short cut."

"I am expecting Mr. Mount at any moment," said Thomas.

"Well, he won't be long," said the boy, "because he left Wilkins' Coffee House in front of me, and I heard him tell the chairmen to bring him to this address."

"What is the name, please?" Thomas inquired.

"Name? Dick Arlington. But, of course, he won't know me. I was sent by Mr. Fazeley of The London Courier."

"Ah, the newspaper? You had better step into the hall, then, and wait."

THE boy obeyed thankfully, taking off his three-cornered hat.

"Mr. Mount left his snuff-box on the table at the coffee house," he explained. "I've brought it with Mr. Fazeley's compliments. And he'll do himself the honour to

call on Mr. Mount in the morning."

"H'm!" The old serving-man sniffed doubtfully. "I don't know as Mr. Mount wishes to meet journalists. But there's no harm in asking. And it was civil of Mr. Fazeley to send you through all this rain with the snuff-box. Ah," he said, as the louder professional rat-tat of a chairman was heard, "this sounds more like our gentleman."

He opened the door again, then flung it wide. Into the candle-light came two stalwart, muffled figures with dripping hat-brims and glistening noses. Between them was a sedan-chair. Its windows, too, were mottled with raindrops. The men set it down in the middle of the hall, and slipped the leather slings from their shoulders. The man in front stepped from between the poles, turned, and opened the door of the sedan.

"Here ye are, sir," he began in a throaty voice. The next words were stifled on his lips. He gasped, dumbfounded.

There was no passenger on the seat inside.

INSTANTLY there was consternation in the hall.

The other chairman dived round from behind—the servant and the boy craned forward—to make sure that the sedan was really empty.

"Am I goin' crazy?" inquired the first chairman.

"It's past believin'," gasped his friend.

Everyone was exclaiming at once. Their raised voices brought Mr. Cogwell hurrying downstairs to investigate. The merchant was an elderly man, with spectacles and slippers.

Thomas began to explain to his master. The chairmen broke in to tell their story and defend themselves from any possible suspicion. Dick put in a word of his own to support the first part of their

evidence. He recognised the chair and its bearers. He had seen Mr. Mount step into it at Wilkins' Coffee House, and heard him give Mr. Cogwell's address.

"But — but it's impossible!" wailed the old merchant. "A man can't vanish from a sedan-chair like that." He stared at the two frightened chairmen. "If I didn't know you fellows well by sight, I should suspect you of some villainy."

"We been carrying chairs in the city this twenty year, Mr. Cogwell," said the first man, squaring his shoulders, "an' never a word has ever been breathed against our characters—"

"I know, I know. But—did you come straight here from Wilkins' Coffee House?"

"Straight here, Mr. Cogwell."

"Is your chair bewitched then? You mean to tell me that Mr. Mount just vanished during the journey? Mr. Mount is a fair-sized gentleman. Can't you tell any difference when you have someone in the chair and when you haven't?"

The two chairmen turned and gaped at each other.

"I never felt any difference, did you, Sam?"

"No, Matt, can't say as I did."

The boy Dick was stooping forward in front of the sedan. He broke in upon their talk.

"No wonder they didn't, sir. Look here."

"WHAT'S that, boy? Thomas, hold the candle so that I can see. What are these great stones doing here?"

Three heavy slabs of masonry were revealed in the light of the candle.

"Well!" gasped the first chairman. "Well, I'll be hanged! Now we know why the chair still felt heavy."

"Yes, you fool," said the old merchant sharply, "but we still don't know how Mr. Mount could change into three pieces of stone."

"I vow to you, Mr. Cogwell, sir—"

"Listen. Are you quite positive you came straight here from the coffee house without making any call or stop of any kind?"

"Positive, sir!"

"Just a moment, Matt," interrupted the other chairman. "True we didn't call anywhere, but we did stop, ye remember."

"Ah, that's right, Sam, so we did. 'Twas just by the Fleet Bridge, Mr. Cogwell. The gentleman rapped on the glass, and o' course we stopped. Reckoned he'd heard a shout, an' thought someone had fallen in the river. Well, we'd heard nothing, and it didn't seem likely, but he would have us take my lantern and look about. Course, we couldn't see anyone—it's a pitch-black night and it was peltin' with rain just then."

Answers on page 12

Continued on page 13

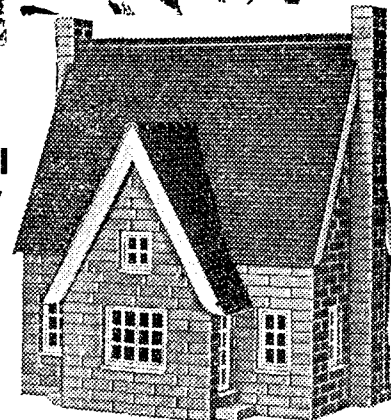
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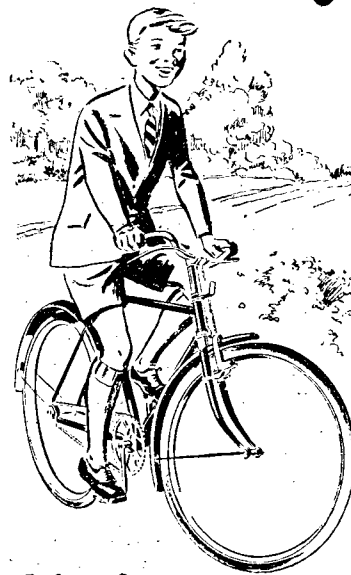
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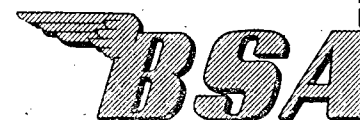
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