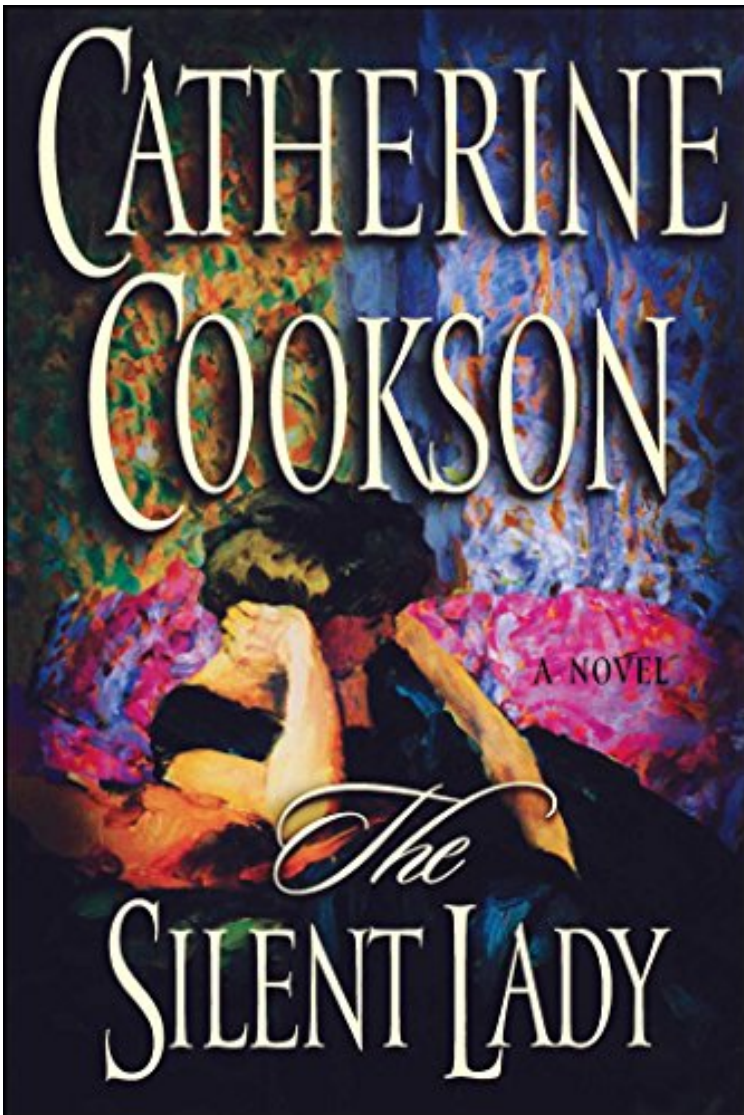


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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurCatherine Cookson was one of the world's most beloved writers. Her books have sold millions of copies, and her characters and their stories have captured the imagination of readers around the globe. She passed away in 1998, but luckily for her fans, Cookson left behind several unpublished novels, among them the compelling Silent Lady.The story begins with a shocking revelation, delivered by a disheveled woman who presents herself at the offices of a respectable law firm in London. At first the receptionist suspects this mysterious woman is a vagrant; the clothes that hang on her frail body are filthy, and she seems unable to speak. When the woman requests to see the firm's senior partner, Alexander Armstrong, she is shown the door -- but when Mr. Armstrong learns the name of his visitor, all the office staff is amazed by his reaction. For Irene Bainsdor is a woman with a past, and her emergence from obscurity

signals the unraveling of a mystery that had baffled the lawyer for twenty-six years. To those around her, Irene Baidor had been a young woman of class and musical talent, the wife of a wealthy and powerful man, and the mother to a beloved baby boy. But behind closed doors she was a woman with a dangerous husband, a husband who would one day act with such cruelty that Irene would be left without most of her voice and memory. It was then that Irene disappeared. What Irene had been doing, and where she had been, gradually emerges over the following weeks, as the unlikely benefactors who had befriended her step forward to reveal the remarkable life she has led. Fans of Cookson's novels, with their larger themes of romantic love and class conflict, will be delighted by the mystery and surprise of *The Silent Lady*. Drawing from her own firsthand experience of working-class life between two world wars and in the 1950s, Cookson once again displays the irresistible plotting, scene-setting, and characterization that have made her an icon of historical and romance fiction.

Chapter 1

The woman put out her hand towards the brass plate to the side of the half-open door. She did not look at the name on the plate, which said, 'Alexander Armstrong Son, Solicitors', but seemed to find support from it by touching its frame while she stood drawing in deep, shuddering breaths. When she finally straightened herself and stepped through the doorway into a carpeted hall, she made her faltering way towards the desk to the left of her, behind which stood a young woman with her mouth agape. The receptionist did not greet the visitor with a customary 'Can I help you, madam?' or 'Have you an appointment?' because, to her, it was instantly evident that this woman was a vagrant and had no business here; so she did not wait for her to speak but said, 'What d'you want? I...I think you've come to the wrong place.' When the woman answered, 'Mis-ter Armstrong,' the girl was again surprised, this time by the sound of the voice, for it didn't match the woman's appearance. Although it was only a husky whisper it had, she recognised, a certain refinement about it. But the appearance of the woman definitely outweighed the impression her voice made, for the girl now said abruptly, 'He only sees people by appointment.' The woman pointed to her chest, then to her eyes and, opening her mouth wide, she brought out three words, 'He see me.' 'He's -- he's very busy.' Again the head went back and the mouth opened, and the woman said, 'Mrs Baidor.' Again the voice made an impression on the receptionist, so much so that she turned quickly and, pushing open the glass-panelled door of her office, she picked up the phone, at the same time watching the woman now turn from the counter and grope her way to a chair that was set near a small table on which stood a vase of flowers. 'Miss Fairweather?' 'Yes. What is it?' 'There's a...a person here.' Her voice was very low. 'What did you say? Speak up!' 'I said there's a person here. She...she looks like a vagrant but she says Mr Armstrong will see her.' 'A vagrant! What makes you think she looks like a vagrant?' 'Well, Miss Fairweather, you want to look at her yourself and see if my opinion is wrong.' The receptionist was daring to talk like this to Miss Fairweather, but she felt there was something very unusual about this woman. 'Did you get her name?' 'Yes, but it sounded funny, like Barndoor.' 'Barndoor?' 'That's what it sounded like.' At the other end of the phone Miss Fairweather sat pondering. Should she go downstairs and see who this person was who looked like a vagrant, or should she mention the name to Mr Armstrong to see if he knew any such person? She decided on the latter. She tapped on the door that separated her office from that of her employer and when that gentleman raised his head from reading a large parchment set out in front of him and said, 'What is it?' she coughed before saying, 'Miss Manning says there's an odd-looking person downstairs who says she wants to see you. Apparently she doesn't seem able to get rid of her. From Miss Manning's tone the woman appeared to think that you would know her name.' 'Well, what is it? I mean her name.' 'It sounded to Miss Manning, so she says, like Barndoor.' 'What?' 'Well, that's what she said...Barndoor.' Miss Fairweather was absolutely astounded at her employer's reaction to the mention of this name, for he jumped from his seat and shouted, yes, actually shouted aloud, 'Baidor, woman! Baidor! My God!' She saw the parchment that he had been dealing with almost slide off the back of the desk as he thrust his chair back, then he ran across the room, almost knocking her over where she stood holding the door half open. She had been with Mr Armstrong for fifteen years and had never seen him act like this. He was a placid, middle-aged man, strict in a way but always courteous. His excitement touched her. And now she was on the landing watching him almost leaping down the stairs. When Alexander Armstrong reached the hall he stood for a moment gripping the stanchion post as he looked across at the woman, her body almost doubled up in the chair. He couldn't believe it: he couldn't and he wouldn't until he saw her face. The woman did not lift her eyes to his until she saw his legs standing before her; then slowly she looked up and he gasped at the sight of her. The face might have been that of her skeleton, with the skin stretched over it, so prominent was the bone formation. Only the eye sockets tended to fall inwards and from them two pale, blood-shot eyes gazed up at him. Two words seemed to fill Alexander Armstrong's mind and body and they kept repeating themselves: My God! My

God! Then, too, was added the knowledge that sitting here looking at him with those almost dead eyes was a woman for whom he had been searching -- at least, for whom he and his business had been searching -- for twenty-five years. No, nearly twenty-six. The words he brought out were in a muttered stammer: 'M-M-Mrs Baidor. She did not answer but made a small movement with her strangely capped head. He held his arms out to her now, saying, 'Come upstairs with me, Irene.' When she made the attempt to rise she fell back into the chair and her body seemed to fold up again. At this he swung round to where Miss Fairweather was standing at the foot of the stairs and yelled at her, 'Call my son!' and when she answered shakily, 'He's out, Mr Armstrong; you know, on the Fullman case.' Then get Taggart -- anybody?' The chief clerk Taggart's office was at the other end of the building, and Miss Fairweather ran back up the stairs and along the corridor. Within two minutes Taggart was standing beside his employer, saying, 'Yes, sir?' Help me to get this lady to my office.' For a moment Henry Taggart hesitated while he took in the lady's garb. She was a vagrant, if ever he had seen one in his life. But he did as he was bidden. Not only did he help the weird long-coated bundle to her feet, but, seeing that she was unable to stand and there wasn't room for three of them on the stairs, he picked up what the boss had called a lady, carried her up the stairs into the main office and laid her, as directed by Alexander, on the leather couch that was placed next to the long window overlooking the square. Then, again almost shouting at his secretary, Alexander said, 'Make a cup of tea...strong, plenty of sugar.' From a cupboard he took down off a shelf a brandy flask and poured from it a measure into the silver-capped lid. This he took to the couch and, kneeling down by the woman, he put it to her lips, saying gently, 'Drink this.' She made no effort to stop him pouring the liquid into her mouth; but when it hit her throat she coughed and choked and her whole body trembled. He turned and said to the clerk, 'Go down to the office and get the girl to phone for an ambulance.' It must have been the sound of the word 'ambulance' that roused the woman, brought her head up and a protesting movement from her hand. At this Alexander, bending down to her, said, 'It's all right, my dear. It's all right. Not a big hospital...I understand. I understand.' She lay back now and stared at him; then he turned quickly from her and, going to the phone on his table, he rang a number. When, presently, a voice answered him, saying, 'Beechwood Nursing Home,' he said curtly, 'Get me the Matron, quick!' 'Who's speaking?' 'Never mind who's speaking, get me the Matron quick!' 'But, sir...!' 'I'm sorry. I'm Miss Armstrong's brother.' 'Oh. Oh yes, yes,' came the reply; and then there was silence. As he stood waiting, he turned and looked at the wreckage of a life lying on his couch, and again his mind cried, 'My God!' 'What is it, Alex?' said his sister's voice. 'Listen, Glenda. I'm sending you a patient.' 'You're not asking if we've got any room.' 'You'd have to make room somewhere. This is important.' 'I cannot make rooms --' 'Listen, Glenda. Have you a room?' 'Yes, as it happens I have, Alex; and may I ask what is up with you?' 'You'll know soon enough. Get that room ready; there'll be an ambulance there shortly and I shall be following it.' The voice now was soft: 'What is it, Alex? You sound troubled, very troubled.' 'You'll know why in a short time, Glenda. Only tell the staff that there must be no chit-chat about the condition of your new patient. I mean how she appears...is dressed. For the moment just get that room ready.' Then, his voice changing, he said, 'This is a serious business, Glenda, and I can't believe what I am seeing lying on my office couch. Bye-bye, dear.' When he put the phone down and turned round, Miss Fairweather was standing with a cup of tea in her hand, looking as if she was afraid to touch the weird bundle lying there. He took the cup from her; then, kneeling down again, he put one hand behind the woman's head to where the cap affair she was wearing bulged out into a kind of large hairnet, which fell on to her neck. It had been half hidden by the large collar of her worn, discoloured and, in parts, threadbare coat. Lifting her head forward, he said, 'Drink this, my dear.' Again she was staring into his face; but now she made no movement of dissent when he put the cup to her lips. After she had taken two gulps of the strong tea and it began to run from the corners of her mouth, he quickly handed the cup and saucer back to Miss Fairweather and, taking a handkerchief from his pocket, he gently dabbed the thin lips. When he saw her make an effort to speak again, he said softly, 'It's all right, my dear. There'll be plenty of time to talk later.' But she still continued to stare at him; and what he heard her say now brought his eyes wide, for she murmured, 'My son...tell my son...He will come.' He knew he was shaking his head slowly. She thought h...Prsentation de l'diteur Catherine Cookson was one of the world's most beloved writers. Her books have sold millions of copies, and her characters and their stories have captured the imagination of readers around the globe. She passed away in 1998, but luckily for her fans, Cookson left behind several unpublished novels, among them the compelling *Silent Lady*. The story begins with a shocking revelation, delivered by a disheveled woman who presents herself at the offices of a respectable law firm in London. At first the receptionist suspects this mysterious woman is a vagrant; the clothes that hang on her frail body are filthy, and she seems unable to speak. When the woman requests to

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