



# **Mirror, Mirror**

**By**

**Mary Hamer**

*The glamorous villa she's rented for a family holiday is all Serena hoped for. Why then does she find herself beset by figures from the past?*

Verona: a girl steps down from a train. The case she's carrying is cheap, knocked about. It leaves her ashamed. Stoical, she looks around for the stranger, the father of the children she is to teach.

In the car she knows to make conversation. Later, at the house, she will find the dress she meant to wear is hopelessly crushed. She will put it on anyway. The maid will take her for sixteen.



Back in Italy fifty years on, a grandmother now, she gets out of the car. Driving down from Naples, the map on her lap and a sheet of instructions from the agency, Serena hasn't been looking forward to pleasure. Fear—of making a mistake, misreading the map, having to turn round and go back—left no room for that.

She'd do a lot to avoid going wrong, having to turn back.

Plus it's the whole enterprise: renting a villa, inviting every one of the children and grandchildren. So much to take on.

Yet as she sets out to explore, to take possession, something in her settles.

She is starting to register a sense that she's been here before.

Where and when she doesn't ask.

She is just aware of being reminded.

It's not really the house, satisfying and solid, that feels so familiar, though its long mass of pale stone is faintly glamorous, perhaps out of some half-remembered film. No, it's something about the setting, the caressing warmth. The pines are so tall, the spaces between so wide. As though she had shrunk, was small once more. The needles are crisp, they tickle her feet through her sandals. She treads

over towards the low wall that stands between her and the sea. Beyond, a white sailing boat small as a toy, glitters and rocks.



Now, looking back towards the wide terrace below the house she has a distinct sense of recognition. And of responsibility. As though she's being invited to accept this place as her own, a demesne. Hers to keep ordered, to protect. Those tall trees, the falls of pink and white oleander too, lift her heart: beyond explanation it's like coming back home.

She comes to a stop. How could that feel good, 'coming home'? She has put everything into leaving behind the home she grew up in. She'd got away. Escaped.

Caught out for a moment, she pushes the confusion aside. Concentrate. She had put everything into finding a place for her family. Officially, to celebrate her seventieth birthday. Not with a party, they'd had that months earlier on the day itself: no, she just wanted to bring the whole family together once more. She was aware that some resistance was likely.

'Never again', one family had said after the trip for David's seventieth. It never occurred to her that the most powerful resistance might be her own.

Serena had conceived the whole project in terms of practical issues: the question of the number of bedrooms, the location, the distance from the beach. Not least the touchy matter of dynamics between families. Longing on her own account to avoid the tense conjunctions, the furious whispered complaints in private, the pressure on her to make life happy that came with being a mother, especially the mother of a step-family, she'd managed to come up with a plan that would definitely keep family A and family C apart. Above all, with discretion. She really didn't want anyone to guess or feel cheated.

There were four families to accommodate over the two weeks. With a bit of juggling the cordon sanitaire could be made to work. It would all be fair, she told herself. Glossing over the contortions involved, she was confident she had been fair all round. One way and another it had all taken a lot of managing but she was relieved. Everyone would have their due.

And it was certainly easier to manage than when she was a girl, dealing with her old family. Then all she could control was her own behaviour. She'd been determined to keep some kind of order for herself and her small brothers when the hands-on mother who used to take care of everything collapsed and seemed to have forgotten them. A frightening stranger who kept kneeling down in the street to pray had taken her mother's place.

She'd turned away from that sight as a girl but just recalling it still froze her. She refused to be associated with that stranger. But she was pleased, looking back, at the way she'd managed to take care of her brothers. She'd made sure there was always something to eat and read the little boys stories in bed every night, like her mother used to. She'd been good at that.

In the days when they were still getting to know each other, David had been curious about her family. Had it marked her, he wondered, all that responsibility, not even a teenager.

'D'you think you still feel resentment?' he'd asked.

The question came back to irritate her as she stood among the fallen pine needles. What choice had she had? She couldn't just stand back. Let everything fall apart. Collapse. Be like her mother. Never.

‘What choice did I have?’ she repeated.

But now, spoken aloud here in this place that was inexplicably familiar, this place which enfolded her in warmth, the question refused to die away.

Had she forgotten anything?

Even the bathroom was glamorous, all glittering gold tiles and mirrors. They were still admiring it when the grating of wheels on fine gravel brought them out onto the terrace. It must be the cook. As they watched, a figure emerged and started unloading packages from the back seat. A week earlier in London, sitting at her computer Serena had chosen the menu for that first evening. She made for the kitchen. On her way she barely noticed someone, a scrawny woman lugging bucket and mops in the distance.

Moving between the formica-topped table and the tall fridge was a woman with a broad pleasant face, who introduced herself as Valeria. She explained that Lilli—that must be the woman with the mops—was the maid and responsible for housework. To Serena Valeria looked as much like a nurse as a cook in her white overall and cap. But there was nothing clinical about her. Laughing, gesturing, she displayed the large rough-skinned lemons she’d bought from a neighbour. The cheeses came from a small dairy she knew: tomorrow a special local variety would be available. ‘Basta’, she apologized cheerfully and stopped herself. ‘I do run on.’

Serena only had scraps of Italian picked up in Verona before she was twenty but it seemed they were somehow going to be enough to make a bridge between them. What’s more, their tastes coincided completely. Hearing that local ingredients, simple dishes, were what was wanted Valeria beamed. Just what she herself believed was healthiest and best. Lunch would be at one, dinner at eight. Did that suit? Menus would be agreed the previous evening and she, Valeria, would shop for ingredients every day.

‘I will take care of everything,’ she confirmed.

In the nicest way Valeria was treating her like a child. Her words opened the door to a world without responsibility.

Serena had loved the idea of being free, not having to shop or cook but she hadn't imagined how soothing Valeria's daily presence and their evening consultations would be. 'Non ti preoccupare,' Valeria would calm her, using the intimate form as though they were family, whether Serena was at a loss for vocabulary or for ideas for the next meal. She brought a steady rhythm to the days. And neither Serena nor David had foreseen how the tiresome squabbles and decisions around a kitchen and mealtimes— 'we need to eat earlier', 'my children won't eat that', 'I'll just make a snack'—were transcended at a stroke. Everyone showed up, drifted along, and sat together round the long table on the terrace for breakfast, for lunch, for supper without demur.

It was a pity Lilli was in charge of breakfast—it all seemed a bit beyond her, especially the coffee—but that cast the only shadow.

Serena herself was changing. In this world of calm she felt herself opening, letting go. From the first, she felt no call to organise, to make plans. When David spoke of visiting the Greek temples at Paestum she fell in with him, though with reluctance. Such educated interests seemed to belong to another world, a different life. Children's stories, with their tales of enchantment, were a better match for the life she was experiencing here. As though under a spell she was all sensation, given up to the heat. Charmed by the sense of being wrapped in warmth—even in the early morning, when she stepped out onto the terrace in her bare feet, the stones were already heating up—she looked for no further explanation for the change in herself.

At the same time, though she'd told no one, she was in constant pain. This did trouble her. Not quite physical but almost, insistent, specific. Nothing like anything she'd felt before, she'd been struggling to give it a name. Turning back to the stories her mother read her as a child, 'A shirt woven of nettles', she murmured at last. Like the fairytale about the shirts the sister wove with blistered hands to save her brothers. She'd always rather seen herself in that girl.

Only much later did she think of hair shirts and shame. 'Saints used to wear hair shirts under their clothes, right next to their skin,' her Irish mother had

explained when she was small. 'No-one else could see, though. It was a secret. They did it because they knew they'd done things that were wrong, and they were sorry.'

But she really couldn't see how that applied to her.

Insistent, inexplicable, constant, the sense of discomfort would not leave her. Yet it didn't take away from her pleasure, the satisfaction in this place she'd chosen. It was as though it went with the pleasure, was its twin, this pain that felt as close as the warmed stones under her bare feet. Like the reliable and welcome heat, pain was the constant medium through which she moved.

She had never known anything like this she told herself.

Simple ease wasn't possible. Fevered skin nagged away at her, couldn't be avoided, didn't allow escape. With no idea what it meant or whether she ought to do something about it, she spoke of it to no one. Not so much stoicism as bewilderment: Serena couldn't understand what was happening to her.

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The first couple of days unreeled without any effort on her part. She really had joined the ranks of the children. Though they were a good deal more active. The undergrowth beyond the pine trees crashed and echoed to wild games. On the terrace the occasional pock of table tennis rallies. Younger children, joined by one adult or another, shrieked and splashed, away beyond the pool-house. Mothers peered over their sunglasses to applaud, spread suncream, then picked up their novels again.

Life at the villa seemed protected, positively enchanted. At all hours the faintly orange scent of the pines. At night a young fox blurred by in the dark beyond the gleam of the citronella coils laid out to keep the mosquitoes at bay. Lit by the glow from the kitchen, Valeria stood chatting with the maintenance man's wife, admiring their new baby. Beyond the curving black trunks of pine and eucalyptus the sea shone. Serena and David swam twice a day.

There were always new surprises, new cues—as it first seemed—for delight. Until the day she came to a halt touching David's bare arm.

'Look, along there, down the lane. It reminds me of that Indian film we saw. The procession. Chanting priests, the drugged widow on the way to be burned...'

Her voice tailed off. The memory stirred something like dread in her.

Behind them the empty path, pale stones underfoot, overhead dark foliage, formed a tunnel. Brooding, deserted, blank. Waiting, as though an actor were about to appear.

In fact, the person who did actually make an entrance every single day was Lilli, bringing the breakfast. A gaunt half-starved figure, overladen, arms at full stretch around a carton packed with supplies she'd picked up from the supermarket—croissants, milk, bags of coffee, yogurts—she would cry 'Signora, scusa, scusa' as though the day had already defeated her.

The very sight of Lilli was disturbing: Serena knew it didn't bring out the best in her. She wasn't proud of herself but she did resent being faced with this sad creature. Lilli stuck out in that place.

Besides, Serena sometimes feared she herself might look like that.

Deprived, frantic. Placatory.

Lilli had more to do than she could cope with. She ran between kitchen and terrace frowning. It looked as though it was the first time she'd had to serve breakfast. Every morning there was a meal for eleven to lay out but she made no use of a tray.

They wanted to find a way to help but that only seemed to confuse her. The numbers were too great for making coffee on the stove, the only way Lilli was used to. It meant they all had to hang about while children clamoured for food and Lilli herself was miserably flustered as she ran up at last with the tall metal coffeepots. Yet it was too hard for her to change, to face learning something new, something that would be easier.

'Non sono capace,' she quavered, when David offered to show her how to use the cafetières. Instead it was agreed they would see to the coffee themselves.

But there was no rest for Lilli. As soon as the family had taken their places at the table, she hurried off to do out the bedrooms.

Serena tried to see as little of her as possible.

Unexpectedly, she herself became busy. Once she'd noticed the washing machine in the kitchen it seemed to set off some kind of internal alarm. She couldn't imagine what had got hold of her. In spite of herself she collected load after load. As if she couldn't just be on holiday, be free. The others did collect their own clean clothes from the washing lines but she still found more tasks for herself. Her arms full of crumpled dresses, she came to a halt. She was as bad as Lilli. What could be going on?

But she was tired of mistrusting herself, all this anxious second-guessing. She must get a move on. She put the dresses down on the bed and set out to ask Lilli for an ironing board. After all the years that had passed since her weeks in Verona as a girl, she could still remember 'stirare' was the word for doing the ironing.

She brightened, stepping out into the dazzling light. It brought back mornings in Italy when she was nineteen: her first long vacation from Oxford. A summer near Verona, in a long low house overlooking Lake Garda, engaged to live with the family and speak English with the children.

A godsend. It had saved her from having to go home.

The household she was joining had a steady rhythm. Before breakfast the clack of high heels on terracotta would tell her that Anna, the mother, was hurrying between the children and checking that the maid had set the table properly and was getting on with the coffee. In the afternoons big cheerful local women came in to take care of the laundry. It was too hot inside, so they set up their ironing boards out in the open on the terrace. In the background songs played from a little radio perched on the windowsill.

Serena stopped in her tracks. She'd surprised herself. She remembered it all in such detail, even that awful crumpled dress she'd put on the first day. It was all coming back irresistibly, in a cascade. How they gave her an evening at the Opera, finishing up sharing pizza round a table out in the warm darkness, and once the mother took her to Venice for the day. Another time there was an expedition to one of Anna's favourite small shops. She made Serena stand in daylight by the shop door, then ran back and forth trying different shades against

Serena's skin, to find the right silk scarf, in a soft green. Later she'd picked out a dress from her own wardrobe in the same tone and made Serena a present of it, with the right lipstick.

Yet those warm memories were mixed with a sense of her past unease in the face of all that was offered her. It was as though she'd known at the time that she didn't deserve such kindness. In fact, no longer kept in soft focus, the memories of that Italian summer were edged with shame. She approached that gingerly, not sure now what she was letting herself in for. She would have preferred not to know, to forget but the shame wouldn't go away. In spite of the strong sun, a shiver crept over her and she sank into a wicker chair.

It was too bright out here after all. She was squinting.

She couldn't stop the flow of recollection now, it moved on like a film unrolling. Here was the evening when a friend of the husband, an American on vacation, arrived for dinner.

'What a place you've got here,' the visitor had said, transparently impressed, as they stood with their drinks on the terrace, looking out over the lake.

He'd turned to Serena.

'We don't have anything at home like this and I guess you don't either.'

She had been stung, pierced by a resentment and shame she couldn't bear to analyse.

Fifty years on she stood cold under the bright sun, arms clasped around her heart, breath short. It was as if he knew. Saw through her to the father who had lost his job, the slumped figure of her mother, ash from her cigarette dropping into the sugar bowl unheeded.

With relief she came back to the present. Exhaled. Reassured herself. No wonder she hadn't wanted anyone to connect her with that home.



Out of the shade it was already uncomfortably hot, not ironing weather, as Serena finally made her way up the external steps leading to the bedrooms, wondering all the while at her own actions. But in a few moments Lilli's response to her request seemed positively freakish. Without a word to show that she had understood, she led Serena into the upstairs salon. By a small table she paused. From a clutter of bric à brac she selected a metal statuette of a horseman. Lifted, it revealed a key.

Lilli looked round.

Finger to her lips, she hissed, 'Between you and me. Not the agency. Not the owners.'

Serena recoiled, queasy, as at the whiff of something tainted. Lilli seemed so abject, so sly. Even a bit mad. Ever since her mother's breakdown mad people frightened Serena. Just seeing one in the street threw her off balance, let alone having to engage with one. But this time she couldn't get away.

All she wanted was an iron. But her Italian wasn't up to raising questions, plus she was intent on keeping her distance. That was the way she'd managed with her mother. She wanted nothing to do with this woman, Lilli. She must calm her down, appear to consent to this pact. Smiles, gestures, nods. Keep them empty.

She didn't register how much it disturbed her, this renewed withholding. Instead, she found herself thinking of fairytales where a girl has to ask an old witch nicely for her help. In reality she found it hard to say how old Lilli was. With that haggard look she could have been fifty. Younger than Serena, anyway. Yet in spite of that, in front of her Serena didn't feel in charge, she felt powerless, depleted, no more than a girl.

Retreating awkwardly down the stairs clutching iron and board, she hovered between triumph and confusion. She'd got what she needed: whatever was she doing? In 30 degrees of heat, she'd set herself up to do some ironing. She wasn't sure she wanted the others to know.

Later, in the shuttered darkness of the afternoon, she took up the iron and reached for her favourite dress, a fine black poplin. Expensive. But it had been worth it, she'd loved how it made her look. She spread its billows over the ironing table.

Sleeveless, buttoning at the front down its full length, with wide skirts, she'd often thought it was modelled on a priest's soutane. Today though, for the first time she asked herself what she'd been up to, wearing it. For her, with her Irish mother, her convent schooling, there was no question. Putting on a priest's soutane was an act of sacrilege. She had managed, somehow, to avoid that knowledge when she was admiring herself in the mirror.

The iron wasn't heating up. She jiggled the lead till the red light came on. She wished she had something to spray the dress with while she waited.

Now she was wondering. Could there have been a certain defiance in flaunting herself in that pretty girly soutane? She'd never imagined that. Yet something in her must have been savouring it: the secret pleasure of mocking priests and their authority just by walking down the street.

The street had been a place of humiliation for her as a girl. She used to shrink at the sight of her mother kneeling down on the pavement, arms stretched out, muttering loud prayers. It was worse in church, where she turned up hunched under a vast shawl and made her way to the communion rail bowed almost from the waist, eyes tight shut, lips in exaggerated silent movement.

Serena always pushed the memory away.

Yet today, all of a sudden, she could see the element of pantomime in that scene. Not piety, but performance. A mockery of the priests up at the altar in their embroidered copes? Mockery not unlike her own gesture, dressing up in that soutane.

You couldn't put a pin between them.

Her mother and herself.

She paused. Stood the iron back up.

Now without any effort on her part a different memory fell into place, a memory of information that had come to her long after her mother's death. At the time she hadn't known what to do with it, the rumour that as a girl her mother had complained of sexual abuse—claimed that a priest had been abusing her.

In her mother's Irish family it had been remembered as 'troublemaking': back then nobody would have listened or believed her. She'd have been shouted down.

Serena stood, her task ignored, shame-faced. How could it have taken her so long to put two and two together, to connect those scenes in the street with that whisper of abuse from the past? Now she was paying attention, the scenes she'd resented because of how they made her feel began to look different. To be a sign of resistance. Mockery, revenge. A claim for attention.

Her mother had not given up. You couldn't deny it showed spirit.

Except. Except that she, Serena, had denied it, seeing only failure.

She was going to need time to absorb this image of her mother. It wasn't entirely clear where she was left herself.

Meanwhile, the frivolous soutane was much too dry to iron. She stared at it, distracted.

The following day, she was forced to go and ask Lilli's help for a second time. It really was the last thing she wanted, more dealings with this sad figure. A child had peed his bed and a clean sheet was needed, no question. But she shied at

asking for one, at speaking of something so intimate, even though it only involved a child. She'd have preferred to keep her distance, put a stop to Lilli's attempts to establish a bond with her.

Dishevelled as ever, Lilli was at work cleaning a shower. Serena had no intention of being trapped in a small space with her again: a hail from the threshold would get her attention. Serena had been pleased when she realised she could at least remember that 'cambiare' was how to say 'change'.

As if at the chance she'd been waiting for, a cue, Lilli dropped her mop and let out a burst of Italian. The words 'ogni giorno' were repeated. Serena understood enough to make out:

'I've been changing all the sheets every day. They told me to change them every three days but I took no notice. I change them all every day'.

Serena stiffened, shrinking back in shock. The woman really was a bit crazy she told herself.

Lilli's ongoing quarrel with her employers were nothing to her. She resented being drawn into any trouble with the powers that be.

It was dawning on her that the name for what she felt was anger. She hated having the business sprung on her like this.

She did know, without being able to name it, that she felt accused. She concentrated on justifying herself. It wasn't anything she'd asked for or thought of wanting, a daily change of bedlinen. She had simply asked for a clean sheet. She would have liked to keep raging that this tiresome woman was putting them both in the wrong with her unwanted favours.

But Lilli had left her work and crossed the room forcing Serena to step back outside. Lilli's narrow face, too close to her own, was needy, eager for recognition, for thanks.

Resistance, almost violent, took over Serena.

'This is nothing to do with me,' she told herself one more time. She didn't quite have the heart, though, to hold out. Italian or no Italian—and she didn't have the language to argue— she couldn't quiet the sense that raising objections, refusing thanks when they were so much desired, would show a mean spirit.

And besides, it had already happened. Lilli had put in all that extra work on their behalf. Serena had to accept that she was under an obligation. Dimly, grudgingly, she began to concede that perhaps Lilli did deserve some thanks for what would have been sweating labour. They must all have slept in more comfort through those hot nights on sheets that were fresh and smooth.

She couldn't summon the actual words but did manage to force a smile that she hoped looked grateful. Her only thought was to get away. Away from this woman who kept wrong-footing her.

Empty, exhausted, surrendering, she sank onto a long sunbed and lay back shutting her eyes. Gradually she became conscious of the drone of a small machine in the background. Coming from the house, it was soothing, a reminder that out of sight someone was busy and in charge. It buzzed, she sleepily thought, just like the sound of the Hoover when she was small, out in the street on her tricycle. As she gripped the handlebars, feet planted, looking out at the world, there had been comfort in that sound.

Still not quite in command of herself next morning, it was with dread she realised that Lilli was looking for her. She wasn't sure how much more of this she could take. Beckoning her down the path that led along the side of the house, Lilli paused by a vast arched opening, great wooden doors leaning casually apart. Reluctantly, Serena followed into the shadowy space. She was struck how far it reached back. Once upon a time, she guessed, farm animals might have been sheltered there, a shuffling, nuzzling presence.

Once they were both deep inside and out of sight, Lilli pointed towards a large package she'd evidently parked there earlier. Amongst the rubble of past years—forgotten highchairs and collapsed pool toys stored in there out of the way—the shiny new wrapping paper stood out.

Where it had been torn back, there showed through dark blue—oh no, Oxford blue, how did the woman know that? Lilli ripped away more paper, to reveal a

stack of thick towels, a good half dozen of them, rich and inviting. Serena was confused. She hadn't asked for any such thing.

'They're new, Signora. All new. I took them for you. From the store. The owner doesn't know. For the pool-house.'

Finger at her lips, Lilli smiled, scrawny, waiting.

She was being offered a present, all wrapped with care, and she couldn't get out of accepting it: this Serena faced, however uncomfortable it made her. However nervous she was of Lilli and of getting involved.

Gaining a moment, scarcely knowing what she was doing, she stroked the towels. They were lush, highly desirable, in line with everything about the life they were living in that house, not anything you'd want to reject.

Reject? Once long ago there had been a pile of towels she'd rejected. The shame of it went far deeper than any passing embarrassment. So much more than the towels had been at stake.

It was at the time when her mother was said to have partly recovered, though she was no longer the woman she had once been. Other people still called her 'Madge' but Serena was determinedly keeping her distance. She refused to acknowledge the mother who had gone away, leaving her. She closed her heart.

Her mother was no longer behaving oddly, though now a bit unkempt and hesitant in a way she hadn't been before. She was well enough to go out alone.

If there was one thing that 'd always given Madge a kick, that was a bargain. There'd been a cut-price drapers in the village that she enjoyed going round. When she got home that afternoon she was full of triumph in the bundle of towels she'd bought. For Serena, however, they were a reminder of humiliation. In their drab stripes and thin texture, she saw only the shameful proof that they were poor, now her father had no job.

The very thought of those towels used to make her shrink.

With that thought however, came another. She'd always known that her response, 'Those towels look a bit cheap to me' had been cruel. But now for the first time she faced what she'd really done. Rejecting the towels wasn't the worst

of it. It was the woman herself that she'd rejected, the mother who had once taken care of her.

Too angry to forgive her mother for leaving she'd frozen her out. No more enjoying the warmth of each other's company in the old way. She had never never once melted, despite what it cost. Cost both of them.

The waste, the sorrow of the past could have silenced her.

Yet she had to act right now, in the present.

Her head was spinning as she fought to make sense, to know how best to respond to Lilli. She hadn't the tools, the language to insist that the towels should go back. And anyway, who knew how Lilli would cope with being challenged? A scene would be dreadful. And too unkind.

The towels weren't really that important, Serena told herself at last.

It was Lilli.

But how had Lilli managed to see right into her, to catch sight of things that she had put aside, kept hidden away even from herself? Hidden away as she herself had been long ago, one cold day at a bus stop, when her mother'd held open her own brown tweed overcoat so that little Serena could join her, buttoned up inside it together keeping warm.

Lilli was waiting. The silence felt as though it lasted years.

At long last Serena managed to choke out 'Grazie'.

Then stumbled back towards the light.

Dazzled at first, she put up her hand to shade her eyes. A faint alarm came over her as the pots carefully spaced along the terrace caught her eye. Surely those oleanders weren't drooping like that when they'd arrived? Close up, the jasmines too were limp.

It was all her fault. She'd neglected them.

The sickening moment passed and she came to, embarrassed at her own silliness. Common sense took over and she set off to make use of the house phone. A slender young man duly appeared, trailing a hose from pot to pot, missing out a few and having to be reminded.

She needed time to think.

At that hour of the morning the terrace was deserted. She moved a wicker armchair to the corner of shade and sank into the cushions. This was all too extraordinary. Compelled time after time to face a woman she shrank from, only to come away with a gift. It really was like a fairy tale.

Yet as she began to feel more herself again, slowly the commonsense answer came to her: perhaps Lilli's strange behaviour was really just about money. About being short of money. If Lilli had kept making certain she was noticed, that might simply mean she wanted to make sure of a good tip.

Just looking at her, you could tell that she was not only hard up but crushed, thoroughly demoralised. The sight of Lilli, with her hungry look, a cigarette at her lips as she waited for a lift after work, had made Serena more uncomfortable than she knew. It was unusual, now she came to think about it, to see an Italian woman cut such a poor figure. Perhaps Lilli had no idea how to make the best of herself. Or perhaps, it abruptly occurred to Serena, perhaps too many bad things had happened to Lilli.

Her feet were getting scorched, stretched out in the sun. She tucked them back into the narrow shade.

If Lilli didn't have magic powers, if she wasn't some kind of witch, then it must mean that her own mind had been playing tricks. If that was really the right way to put it. Serena shifted among cushions that were suddenly uncomfortable, too big for that chair.

A suspicion began to creep over her. If this wasn't a fairy-tale, then perhaps it might be a ghost story. Was it too far-fetched to say she'd been haunted? By the mother who had never wanted to give up on her? By her own heart's truth?

There were no answers for her questions. Nevertheless, she wasn't left irritated. She felt calmed.

Resolute, she got to her feet and made for the glittering bathroom with its many mirrors. The image she found there pleased her. In spite of all her old fears, she didn't look crushed like Lilli, not in the least. But the lock that fell over her right eye—that was just the way her mother's hair fell, in the photograph by her

bed at home. A smiling woman, her small son pressing against the silk of her flowered skirts, that last summer when she was still herself.

'You're exactly like her, the way she was before she fell ill. You would have loved her,' an old friend of her mother had once said.

From outside came the sound of high-pitched voices.

The families were beginning to gather for lunch. A few details to sort out here too, now she'd come back to herself.

Now as the little boys arrived, tumbling over each other, pushing, shoving, exclaiming, Serena took charge.

'Let's make sure they're separated from now on at mealtimes', she said.

The parents were surprised.

'Oh. Don't you think it's rather sweet, the little squabbles and the fights they get into?' came lazily back.

'Not at my table.'

Her response, assured, definitive, seemed to her uttered in the voice of a grande dame. She knew it came out of a book, didn't care how it sounded. She meant it.



## Biography

Mary Hamer, educated by the nuns and at Oxford, began as an academic exploring Trollope's writing practice, long before she began to wonder about her own. The books that followed - exploring the image of Cleopatra, on Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* and on trauma ( see [www.mary-hamer.co.uk](http://www.mary-hamer.co.uk)) - moved her closer to thinking about living women and the world which shaped them. Turning to biofiction in *Kipling & Trix*, winner of the Virginia Prize, she called attention to the woman who shared a traumatic childhood with her famous brother. *Mirror, Mirror* is the first short story Mary has published.