

## THE NEW GUINEA MASK

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‘It is generous of you, Marion. I will bring you back something marvellous from Italy. And you can spread yourself out anywhere in the house, make it your own. Except my study of course,’ and Peggy laughed, the irritating snicker that probably only Marion forgave.

‘And you won’t mind in the teeniest bit that I have locked that room. All my treasures are there.’ She leaned forward so that her generous bosom threatened to lurch out. ‘And all my diaries.’

‘Peggy, you do go on. Everyone will be dead by the time anyone gets round to printing your diaries. You should publish them while you can still enjoy the fame.’

In her front room it was that sort of afternoon. Peggy’s house only in name. The signature of her mother was still imprinted on everything, including the chesterfields, relics of an era that included bakelite wireless sets and reading lamps with mulgawood stands. Old Mrs Tilley had finally carked it, as Peggy cheerfully declared, and it was clear she loved the place just as it was, clutter and crowded oddments.

Peggy’s brother Giles seldom came round, which was a blessing. He carried in his shadow too many memories and on his tongue too many reprimands. The fact that Giles, ten years back, had tirelessly urged and cajoled and worked every trick possible to steer Peggy out of that long and dangerous battle with alcohol only made it all the more difficult. Giles was the sort of bloke who praised himself for his part in her rehabilitation. He did not leave much of the credit to Peggy herself. It rankled still. ‘And don’t let Giles get one foot inside this house,’ Peggy warned.

Marion had been part of all that—the effort to get Peggy back on her feet, and the careful holding of her hand, after. Giles only came at crisis point, swept in, did things, decided things and then vanished, leaving Marion most times to mop up the damage. It was Giles who had set Peggy up with her florist shop, it was Giles who had—behind her back—organised the contracts with three of the big hotels and the David Jones store. And, in that admittedly very difficult time, it was Giles who turned up weekly to ‘help’ Peggy enter the books and the records, balance the Debtors’ Ledger and negotiate with the suppliers—who were all his friends, because of contacts through his hardware chain. For two years Giles had been assiduous. And resented. Marion had, of course, been wary of Giles, though Giles had once been, everyone said, sweet on Marion.

His strategy concerning his sister had worked. Peggy gradually had become absorbed in the business side of it, to the point where it was she who crowed when she detected small errors in her brother’s additions or the way he sometimes fudged the figures to make them balance. Giles was a broad-brush businessman not a picky accountant.

By the time Tilley The Florist had become a real goldmine, Peggy and Giles were hardly speaking to each other. But she had not touched a drop in over twelve months by then, and her determination had become rigid. Peggy had become rigid, Marion sometimes thought, but felt guilty afterwards about such reservations. The old Peggy, party-time Peggy, had been exhilarating and giddy for so long it was hard to make way—initially—for the bespectacled businesswoman she had become, almost a parody of ‘bespectacled businesswoman.’

The ‘bad time’, though, was best forgotten.

That scene, for instance, at the Mayoral Ball, when Peggy tore off her ball gown and stuffed it into the great chalice on the official table, one large boob hanging out of her slip and her lipstick notoriously smeared. It was the misapplied lipstick that should have warned her friends, but in the days when Peggy was outrageous and madcap she was the life of the party, except on the occasions when she went over the top, or under the bottom.

Those days. Those nights.

Giles himself had been almost as reckless. He had egged her on. They were the Terrible Tilleyes and everyone loved them.

In a sense, after that long adjustment period—and everyone praised Giles to the skies, of course—not only had Peggy changed but Giles also had become more sobersides. Peggy learned to rein herself in, but Giles had become carping, irritable, jealous. He still wanted credit, ten years later, you could sniff it in him.

Marion seldom saw Giles these days.

Then the death of old Mrs Tilley last year. Marion, though she felt herself almost one of the family, had been surprised by the acrimony. Who would want to fight over this old wooden house, for instance? It needed restumping, the veranda floorboards were eroded to glory, and the old ironwork should have been torn down years back and replaced by glass louvres to keep out the rain and to make the place watertight. The rooms inside were big enough and the high ceilings were unusually generous and gave a sort of grandeur to the interior, almost as impressive as the Carrera marble of the five fireplaces that Peggy when she was younger had been obsessive about, as if nobody else in Southport had ever heard of a marble fireplace. Even so, it was just a rambling old Queenslander and you'd need a fortune to make it look anything.

Peggy and Giles fought over it like cat and dog.

Peggy had the victory because she lived in the house and had always lived there. Possession is the greater part of the law and all that. Peggy had been furious because she expected the house to be left to her, Giles could have everything else. Giles thought otherwise.

Suddenly, out of the blue, he came up with all his childhood memories and associations with that place and announced, in the end, that Peggy could stay there as a life tenant but that half of the furniture and effects were his. He would send a pantechnicon to collect all the cedar stuff and the Rosenstengel bedroom suite and Peggy could keep all the rest. Fair's fair, he had said. Giles had spent hours examining the contents and he knew precisely what had value.

Of course it was not on. Marion sided with Peggy over that. The tension was not eased when Giles announced, through his solicitor, that he would

be out of the country on business for the next five months but on his return the matter must be settled, otherwise he would force a fire sale of the whole property, house, land and contents. They had checked with Peggy's own legal man, Marion and her, and he had not been reassuring. He spoke of a meeting with an 'independent arbiter'. Peggy had snorted. She knew well enough how Giles could be plausible. She confided to Marion, privately, that she feared he would bring up the bad things, especially her Destructive Phase and the Ransack of his bedroom.

Finally Marion persuaded Peggy she should go overseas herself. Take a break. Peggy had the money now, and Marion herself was quite capable of keeping an eye on the florist business, indeed, young Nettie there was managing things.

The only real problem was the house.

The send-off was a flurry. Peggy forgot her passport and her plane tickets and there was a last minute taxi back to Southport. They returned to Coolangatta airport in triumph, just in time for the connection down to Sydney and the Alitalia flight. They hugged and waved and were tearful.

Marion then returned to the house that would be her living quarters for the next six weeks. Somehow, without Peggy, it seemed almost immediately different, almost hostile. Marion had not noticed before just how much of the space Peggy herself had occupied, or had vibrated through. The rooms now seemed more brittle, the ceiling so high up it made everything vault-like. And there were cobwebs up there, why had she never noticed them before?

The cat looked at her guardedly and did not approach. Marion made herself a cup of coffee in the kitchen.

She opened the door to the guest room, the one allocated to her. It was next to Giles's old bedroom, which he had cleared out, every scrap of furniture in a great huff shortly before his own business trip abroad. Her room was narrow and that high ceiling increased the sense. Like a sarcophagus, Marion thought.

*(end of excerpt)*