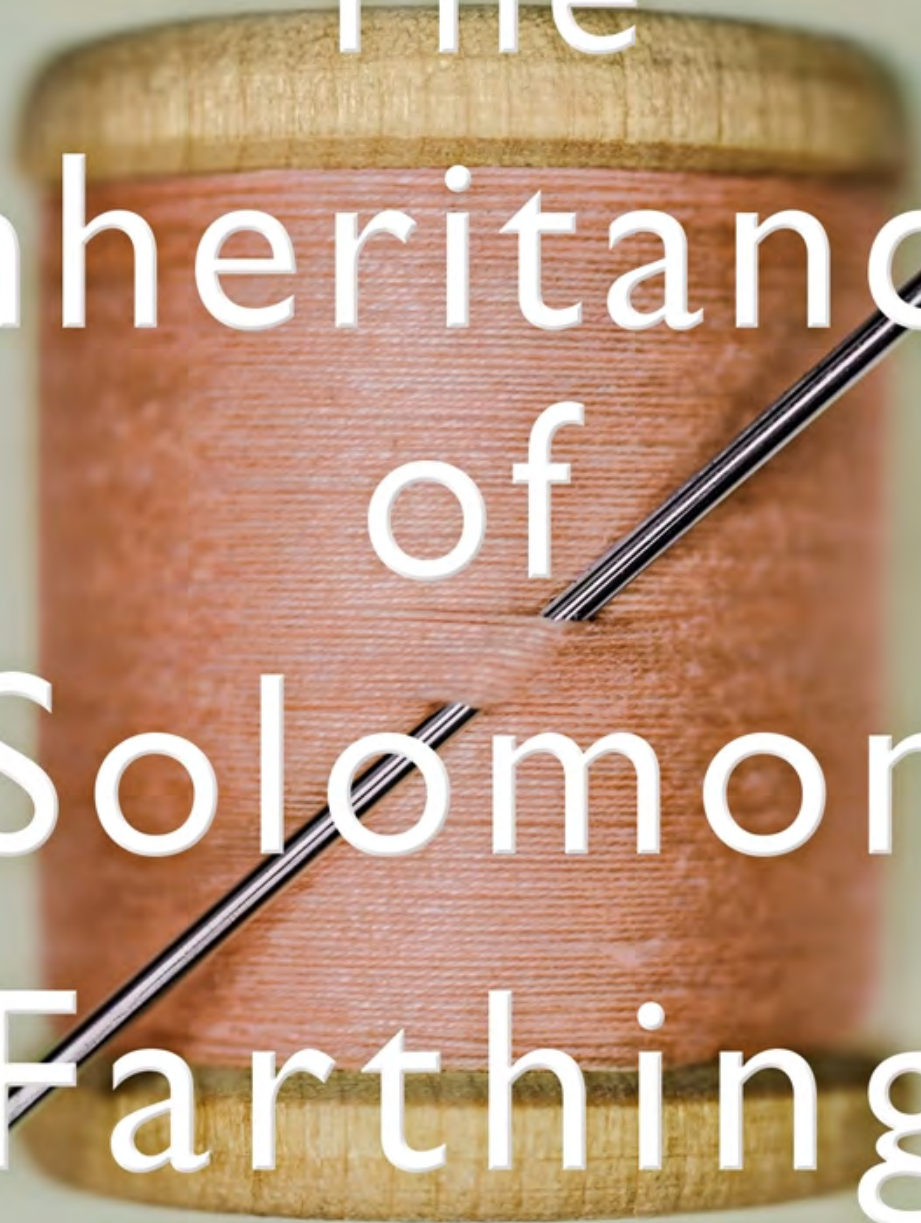


From the bestselling author of
The Other Mrs Walker

Mary Paulson-Ellis



The
Inheritance
of
Solomon
Farthing

Everybody has a story...

‘A richly rewarding, gripping page-turner’

VAL McDERMID

THE BEGINNING

In the end there was one, but there should have been two, dead men laid out amongst the walnut shells, skin already blue. A great rose bloomed over the dead man's heart, there on his second-best shirt, bright amongst the decay. Those who were left looked away, thinking of the one who should have been there but was not, lungs like wings of ice holding him to the bottom of a river where none of them would have to follow now. Above them birds perched silent amongst the branches. The sky hung grey on the horizon. It was morning. Dawn would be here soon.

In the end they drew lots to decide who would choose first:

A wishbone;

A tanner;

A reel of pink cotton.

Before the rest came rummaging, too. Into breast pockets. And hip pockets. And pockets tucked away by the kidneys and the groin. The dead man lay unprotesting as the men dipped their hands in. Everything was sticky. They wiped their palms on damp khaki wool and fingered the rest of the treasure:

Two dice;

That piece of green ribbon;

A canvas pocketbook filled with needles and pins.

They all smelled it. Cordite. And the bullet that was inside the dead man now.

In the end they buried him before they walked away. Not deep, but a dip in the ground scraped out beneath a scattering of walnut shells, like the shallow form of a hare. Their hearts were beating – *one two one two* – as they scratched at the hole. They didn't leave a marker; only the mud on their boots told the tale. And the treasure that came last from the dead man's pockets:

Pawn ticket no.125.

That small square of blue.

In the end the men who were left went ahead, single file across the fields, no sound but the *clink* and *jink* of weaponry as they walked. None of them looked back to see where they had come from. None of them looked ahead to see where they might go. Only one of them stayed behind to pray.

A thread of pink stained the sky as he closed his eyes, standing once more in the shadow of that rubbish dump, remembering fields of buttercups and two kinds of clover. Of air flowing pure as the river at the bottom of the hill. Then there were the whispers of the men as they drew from their pockets – a dice, a penny, a thick stub of pencil. The card in his wallet, *I am quite well* the only words not yet crossed out.

He wondered then what the card would say once it was done. Who it would be sent to. And opened his eyes as light touched his skin. Dawn was spreading low on the horizon. It was November. The end would be here soon.

PART ONE

The Debt

Solomon Farthing
b.1950 d.

2016

One

They called him Old Mortality. After the book. But he hadn't expected to end like this. Face down on a mattress that smelt of urine. Nothing between him and the ground but a cold concrete bunk. It was May, dawn breaking over the city of Edinburgh. But Solomon Farthing could not draw back the curtains to see it, for he was already in the gutter – no money, no friends, no estimation – the last of him dribbling onto the stone floor of a police cell, not even a bottle of Fino to wash away the indignities of his life.

'Wakey, wakey, you bastards! Rise and shine for glory.'

Outside he could hear the clatter of a police station waking to its daily business. Inside he could feel the judder of his heart. Solomon pressed at the soft fat around his nipple. He was not a well man, of that he was certain, a mess of memory lapses and confusions, skin grown irritable on the inside and the out. His most recent predicament did not help, though it was all of his own creation, lying in a police cell without any laces to tie up his shoes. What would his grandfather have made of it, a man for whom respectability was embodied in the buttoning or unbuttoning of a collar. And yet here was his offspring, sixty-six and counting, his shirt hung loose, the edges of his trousers muddy. Also the knees.

There was the sudden shuffle of heavy boots, two police officers coming down the corridor, banging on each metal door as they passed.

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‘Time to get up, gentlemen.’

Solomon levered himself into a sitting position, licked his palm and ran it across his hair. He was hoping for DI Roberts, ex-Enquiry Team, bag carrier for DCI Franklin, come to read him the Riot Act by way of admonition. A warning. A minor fine. A rap on the knuckles. Or, if the dice rolled in his favour, a straight pass through the doors of Gayfield police station into an elegant Edinburgh square. That old haunt of prostitutes and rent boys, first home for all those first-generation immigrants come to the Athens of the North to polish their dreams. Transformed now, of course. Five hundred thousand for three bedrooms and counting. Whatever its murky past, Edinburgh always did find a way of lifting one up in the end.

Solomon pulled his wrinkled fuchsia socks straight at the ankle, attempted to smooth away the creases accumulated after a weekend of sleeping in his clothes. When exactly had he taken the wrong path? he wondered. An Edinburgh Man with at least a semblance of a profession, given to riding the ebb and flow of life to his advantage, lost now like some sort of child abandoned in a storm. His appeal to the only relative he had left in the city – an aunt who wasn’t really his aunt – had elicited nothing but silence. No calls to a solicitor. No demands for early release. Not even a clean set of clothes. Solomon took a surreptitious sniff at one underarm after another, waited for salvation to arrive in the form of a police officer for whom he might have done a favour, once, long ago. It wasn’t that many years since he had known all the officers in the city – by their first names, too:

You scratch my back and I’ll scratch yours.

The Debt

An ability to charm, one of Solomon Farthing's more valuable qualities, though even he knew it was hanging by a single thread now.

But when the hatch was lowered Solomon did not recognize the blank eyes gazing at him through the hole in the door. Female. Young. Discerning. Everything he was not. The PC looked at him for a moment longer than was comfortable, then vanished before Solomon could make any sort of appeal. A shit. A shave. A *good morning*. Not to mention breakfast. Nothing more than the ordinary courtesies of life.

In the cell next door a moan rose up, the same elemental groaning that had kept him awake for most of the weekend.

'Oh man, oh man, oh man. You fucker.'

There was a pause. Solomon waited (the illusion of hope). Then the repeat.

'Oh man, oh man, oh man . . .'

You fucker.

What more was there to say?

The misdemeanour had begun in the ordinary manner. An attempt to make money. A scramble to be first. What else was there when it came to being an Heir Hunter, pursuer of all that remained when someone died without a will.

Property was the key, particularly in a city like Edinburgh. Three bedrooms for sale; five hundred thousand pounds to share amongst those who were left. The return was commission. Ten per cent. Twenty per cent. Sometimes even thirty, if things were going well. The important thing – the crucial thing – was to chase the estates that were worth half a million and counting. And to get there first.

The Inheritance of Solomon Farthing

The house had been abandoned, at least that was what Solomon had been told. A substantial property in a quiet residential street, owner long since deceased. Generous driveway. French windows unlocked at the back. It was a tip-off from Freddy Dodds, normally the most reliable of Solomon's Edinburgh Men, someone who fed him information in return for a first go at whatever riches might not be missed. Solomon's plan had been simple, a typical Heir Hunter's scam. A quick recce inside the empty property to establish its worth, then claim the estate the next day before the crown office got involved, offer to assist any next of kin he dug up with disposal of the remains. Five hundred thousand for three bedrooms and counting. Possession of an empty property with no apparent owner – nine tenths of the law where an Heir Hunter was concerned. It should have been an easy night's work.

The first problem had been the streetlight shining on the very gap Solomon needed to disappear along to access the rear of the house. He stood on the opposite side of the road, breathing in a lilac's heady night-time scent, trying to look as though he was a man who appreciated nature rather than one who would smile as he robbed you of all you had been left. To leave. Or to remain. That was what it amounted to. Solomon's instinct was the former. But despite being the *laissez-faire* type – *what could be done today can always be left until tomorrow* – Solomon knew that this time he did not have any time to waste.

His second problem was the French doors that would not open once he did decide to make his move, no longer unlocked from the inside out as Dodds had assured him would be the case.

The Debt

The third was the absence of an open window any larger than a porthole to scramble through when the motion sensors set off their phosphorescent flare. The whole garden flung into sudden slices of dazzle and shadow. It was the tendency to self-preservation that propelled Solomon forwards. Head first, of course.

He got stuck halfway.

‘Fuck!’

Ripped the sleeve of his second-best shirt. Found himself slithering onto the floor of a cold WC. He came to rest with his head jammed against the toilet bowl, wondered how on earth his life had come to this. A man whose upbringing had been predicated on the polishing of shoes every Sunday, side by side in the scullery with his grandfather. Thank God the old man was long dead, more than forty years in the grave.

Solomon felt as though he was in the grave himself as he hauled himself to his feet and stared into the gloom of a mirror hanging above the tiny cloakroom sink. He looked old. He looked dissolute. He looked drunk. All things that were true. His left hand would not stop fluttering as he held it under a trickle of cold water from the tap, splashed at his face. There was no towel to wipe his hands dry, so he used the tail of his second-best shirt instead. Then he stood listening at the door as though he really was a child again, before stepping into the dark run of the hall.

The house was waiting for him – a potential treasure trove ready to offer its secrets to whomever might ask first. Canteens of silver cutlery, perhaps. Family portraits in curlicues of gilt. A necklace made of pearls. The kind of thing Dodds was interested in. Not to mention

The Inheritance of Solomon Farthing

Solomon's particular concern, three bedrooms, walk-in condition, every estate agent's dream. He crept along trying each door as he came to it, a silent opening and closing of rooms belonging to a dead man, his own reflection looming now and then from a mirror over a fake electric grate. Every inch of the house was carpeted – the rooms, the corridors, the walk-in cupboards – Solomon's tired leather shoes sinking into the pile as though discovering a luxury they had been promised once but never received. He could tell already the house was virgin territory, no other Heir Hunters yet arrived to muddy his patch.

He peered into a linen press, ran his hand along the top of all the door frames, slid open every drawer in the kitchen in the hope of a spare set of keys. But it never occurred to Solomon Farthing that the former occupant might still be in residence, stretched out in the front room across the end of two brocade chairs.

'Christ!

Solomon's heart practically leapt from his chest when he pushed open the living-room door and saw the wooden coffin with its shiny brass handles. Then again when he heard a reply.

'Who's there?'

Female. Loud. Alerting. A woman holding vigil, starting up as Solomon jerked the living-room door closed.

Sitting in.

Wasn't that what they called it? Solomon didn't wait to do any sort of introduction, made his escape instead. His heart was beating a wild *one two* as he heard the woman call after him.

'Solomon Farthing?'

The Debt

Found the French windows open this time, as though they had been all along.

He fell on the patio. Then again on the grass. Made it to the local cemetery then out the other side, by way of diversion, before the blue lights came flashing to take him away. It wasn't until they put him in the squad car, torn cuff flapping aimless about his wrist, that Solomon realized he had lost it. That lucky silver charm he carried always in his pocket – all that remained of his childhood glittering now between a dead man's floorboards. A regimental cap badge, lion raising its paw. Also the motto of the London Scottish:

Strike Sure.