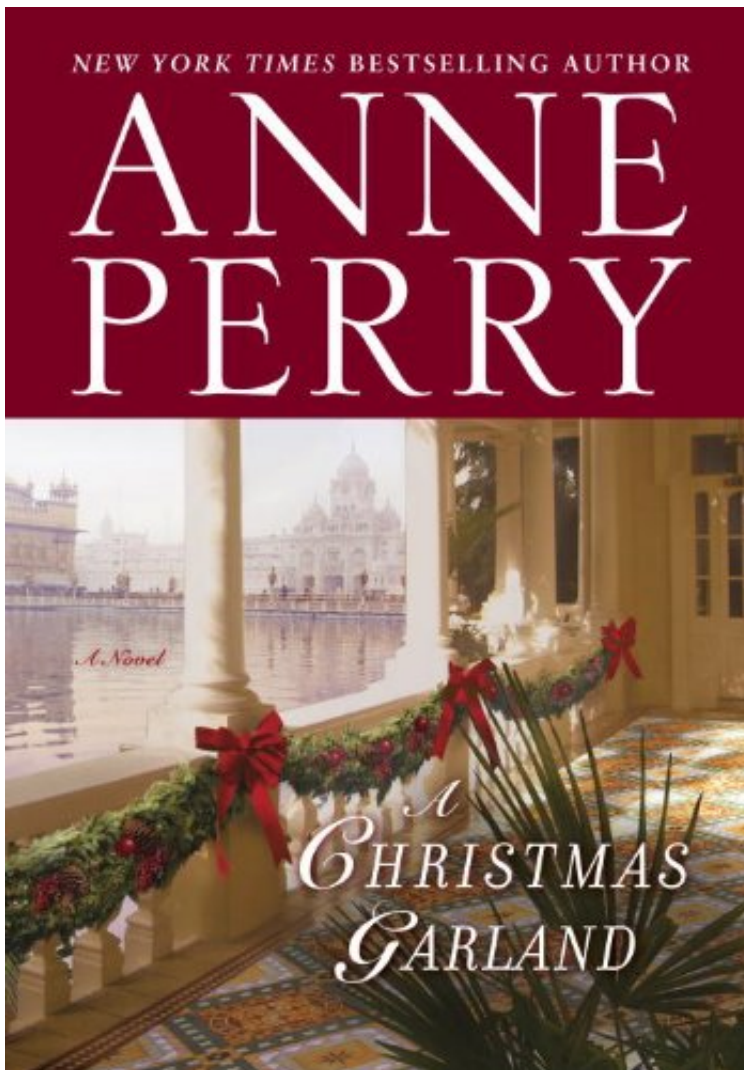


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# A Christmas Garland: A Novel



*Par Anne Perry*  
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## Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurAn annual treat, declared The Wall Street Journal of Anne Perrys Victorian-era holiday mysteries. Now she continues this magnificent tradition with A Christmas Garland, a yuletide tale set in exotic India. This time the mistress of mystery tells the story of a terrible crime that sets the stage for another: accusing an innocent man of murder. The year is 1857, soon after the violent Siege of Cawnpore, with India in the midst of rebellion. In the British garrison, a guard is killed and an Indian prisoner escapes, which leads to yet more British deaths. Cries for revenge are overwhelming. Despite no witnesses and no evidence against him, a luckless British medical orderly named John Tallis is arrested as an accomplice simply because he was the only soldier unaccounted for when these baffling crimes were committed.

Though chosen to defend Tallis, young Lieutenant Victor Narraway is not encouraged to try very hard. Narraways superiors merely want a show trial. But inspired by a soldiers widow and her children, and by his

own stubborn faith in justice, Narraway searches for the truth. In an alien world haunted by memories of massacre, he is the accused mans only hope. The trial of John Tallis equals the white-knuckle best of Anne Perrys breathtaking courtroom dramas. And thanks to a simple Christmas garland and some brilliant detective work, Narraway perseveres against appalling odds, learning how to find hope within himself and turn the darkest hour into one full of joy and light.

PRAISE FOR THE CHRISTMAS NOVELS OF ANNE PERRY

A Christmas Homecoming Could have been devised by Agatha Christie . . . [Perry is] a modern master. Pittsburgh Post-Gazette Vastly entertaining . . . uplifting and thought-provoking by turns. The Star-Ledger A Christmas Odyssey [Perry] writes with detail that invades the senses. Lincoln Journal Star A Christmas Promise Poignant . . . should be on the Christmas stocking list of anyone who likes a sniffle of nostalgia. The Washington Times A Christmas Grace [A] heartwarming, if crime-tinged, complement to the holiday season. Booklist A Christmas Beginning Intriguing . . . Perrys use of period detail is, as always, strong and evocative. The Seattle Times

From the Hardcover edition. Extrait

Lieutenant Victor Narraway walked across the square in the cool evening air. It was mid-December, a couple of weeks before Christmas. At home in England it might already be snowing, but here in India there would not even be a frost. No one had ever seen snow in Cawnpore. Any other year it would be a wonderful season: one of rejoicing, recalling happy memories of the past, and looking forward to the future, perhaps with a little nostalgia for those loved ones who were far away. But this year of 1857 was different. The fire of mutiny had scorched across the land, touching everything with death. He came to the outer door of one of the least-damaged parts of the barracks and knocked. Immediately it was opened and he stepped inside. Oil lamps sent a warming yellow light over the battered walls and the few remnants of the once-secure occupation, as they had been before the siege and then its relief. There was little furniture left whole: a bullet-scarred desk, three chairs that had seen better days, a bookcase and several cupboards, one with only half a door. Colonel Latimer was standing in the middle of the room. He was a tall and spare man well into his forties; a dozen Indian summers had burned his skin brown, but there was little color beneath it to alleviate the weariness and the marks of exhaustion. He regarded the twenty-year-old lieutenant in front of him with something like an apologetic look. I have an unpleasant duty for you, Narraway, he said quietly. It must be done, and done well. You're new to this regiment, but you have an excellent record. You are the right man for this job. Narraway felt a chill, in spite of the mild evening. His father had purchased a commission for him, and he had served a brief training in England before being sent out to India. He had arrived a year ago, just before the issue of the fateful cartridges at Dum Dum in January, which later in the spring had erupted in mutiny. The rumor had been that the bullets were coated with animal grease, in the part required to be bitten into in order to open the cartridge for use. The Hindus had been told it was beef fat. Cows were sacred, and to kill one was blasphemy. To put cow fat to the lips was damnation. The Muslims had been told it was pork fat, and to them, the pig was an unclean animal. To put that grease to your lips would damn your soul, although for an entirely different reason. Of course, that was not the only cause of the mutiny by hundreds of thousands of Indians against the rule of a few thousand Englishmen employed by the East India Company. The reasons were more complex, far more deeply rooted in the social inequities and the cultural offenses of a foreign rule. The bullets had merely been the spark that had ignited the fire. Also it was true, as far as Narraway could gather, that the mutiny was far from universal. It was violent and terrible only in small parts of the country. Thousands of miles remained untouched by it, lying peaceful, if a little uneasy, under the winter sun. But the province of Sind on the Hindustan plains had seen much of the very worst of it, Cawnpore and Lucknow in particular. General Colin Campbell, a hero from the recent war in the Crimea, had fought to relieve the siege at Lucknow. A week ago he and his men had defeated 25,000 rebels here at Cawnpore. Was it the beginning of a turning of the tide? Or just a glimmer of light that would not last? Narraway stood to attention, breathing deeply to calm himself. Why had he come to Latimers notice? Yes, sir, he said between his teeth. Latimer smiled bleakly. There was no light in his face, no warmth of approval. You will be aware of the recent escape of the prisoner Dhuleep Singh, he went on. And that his guard, Chuttur Singh, was hacked to death in the course of Dhuleeps escape? Narraways mouth was dry. Of course he knew it; everyone in the Cawnpore station knew it. Yes, sir, he said obediently, forcing the words out. It has been investigated. Latimers jaw was tight, and a small muscle jumped in his temple. We know Dhuleep Singh had privileged information regarding troop movements, specifically regarding the recent patrol that was massacred. We also know the man could not have escaped without assistance. His voice was growing quieter, as if he found the words more and more difficult to say. He cleared his throat with an effort. Our inquiries have excluded every possibility except that he was helped by Corporal John Tallis, the medical orderly. He met Narraways eyes.

We will try him the day after tomorrow. I require you to speak in his defense. Narraways mind whirled. There was a chill like ice in the pit of his stomach. A score of reasons leaped to his mind why he could not do what Latimer was asking of him. He was not even remotely equal to the task. It would be so much better to have one of the officers who had been with the regiment during the siege and the relief do it, someone who knew everyone. Above all, they should have an officer who was experienced in military law, who had defended men dozens of times and was known and respected by the regiment. Then a cold, sane voice inside assured him that it was precisely because he was none of these things that Latimer had chosen him. Yes, sir, he said faintly. Major Strafford will be here any moment, Latimer continued. He will give you any instruction and advice that you may need. I shall be presiding over the court, so it is not appropriate that I should do it. Yes, sir, Narraway said again, feeling as if another nail had been driven into the coffin lid of his career. Major Straffords dislike of him dated back to the time before he had joined the regiment. Almost certainly it stemmed from Narraways brief acquaintance with Straffords younger brother. They had been in the same final year at Eton, and little about their association had been happy. Narraway had been academic, a natural scholar and disinclined toward sports. The younger Strafford was a fine athlete but no competition for Narraway in the classroom. They existed happily enough in a mutual contempt. It was shattered one summer evening in a magnificent cricket match, nail-bitingly close, with Straffords team having the slight edge until Narraway showed a rare flash of brilliance in the only sport he actually enjoyed. The dark, slender scholar, without a word spoken, bowled out the last three men on Straffords team, including the great sportsman himself. The fact that he did it with apparent ease was appalling, but that he did not overtly take any pleasure in it was unforgivable. And Strafford Minor had never been able to exact his revenge on the field, which was the only place he could redeem his honor. Other victories did not count. And practical jokes or barbed wit looked to be nothing more than the spite of a bad loser. But that was boyhood, two years ago and thousands of miles away. Captain Busby will prosecute, Latimer was going on. The evidence seems simple enough. You will be free to interview Corporal Tallis at any time you wish, and anyone else you feel could be helpful to your defense. If there are any legal points that you need to clarify, speak to Major Strafford. Yes, sir. Narraway was still at attention, his muscles aching with the effort of keeping complete control of himself. There was a brief knock on the door. Come, Latimer ordered. The door swung open and Major Strafford came in. He was a tall, handsome man in his early thirties, but the echo of Narraways schoolfellow, so much his junior, was there in the set of his shoulders, the thick, fair hair, the shape of his jaw. Strafford glanced at Latimer. Sir. He saluted, then, as he was given permission, relaxed. He regarded Narraway expressionlessly. Youd better read up on the case tonight and start questioning people tomorrow morning, he said. You need to be sure of the law. We dont want anyone afterward saying that we cut corners. I presume you appreciate that? Yes, sir. Narraway heard the edge of condescension in Straffords voice and would dearly like to have told him that he was as aware as anyone else of how they would all be judged on their conduct in the matter. More than that, the future of British rule in India would be flavored by reports of decisions such as this. The whole structure of Empire hung together on the belief in justice, in doing things by immutable rules and a code of honor that they themselves never broke. Thousands of men were dead already, as well as women and children. If the British ever regained control and there was to be any kind of peace, it must be under the rule of law. It was the only safety for people of any color or faith. Otherwise there was no hope left for anyone. Right now there seemed to be little enough in any circumstances. Delhi had fallen, Lucknow, Agra, Jhelum, Sugauli, Dinapoor, Lahore, Kolapore, Ramgarh, Peshawar and on and on. The list seemed endless. Good, Strafford said curtly. Whatever you think you know, youd better come and see me and tell me at least the outline of your defense. He looked at Narraway closely, his blue eyes curiously luminous in the light of the oil lamp. You must be sure to mount some defense you do understand that, dont you? At least put forward a reason why a man like Tallis should betray the men he served beside all his career. I know hes a quarter Indian, or something of the sort, but thats no excuse. *Revue de presse* 'Delightful . . . The perfect gift for a whodunit addict who likes to curl up with a good book after Christmas lunch' (Oxford Times) 'This engaging historical mystery offers an introspective look at the character, Narraway, who will become the future boss of Thomas Pitt, star of Perry's long-running series. Perry's tenth Christmas novel is a winner' (Booklist) 'Perry avoids all of the mawkish pitfalls that are usually the hallmark of holiday books by choosing an unconventional setting and decidedly different approach. Rather than leaning on sentiment, she writes an honest, though somewhat grim, story that captures the essence of 19th-century India and the character of a compassionate man. A novel approach to an oft-explored subject, this tale will delight Perry's fans and bring her new ones' (Kirkus s) 'A bite-sized mystery

that could be fitted in after your Christmas lunch' (Daily Telegraph)