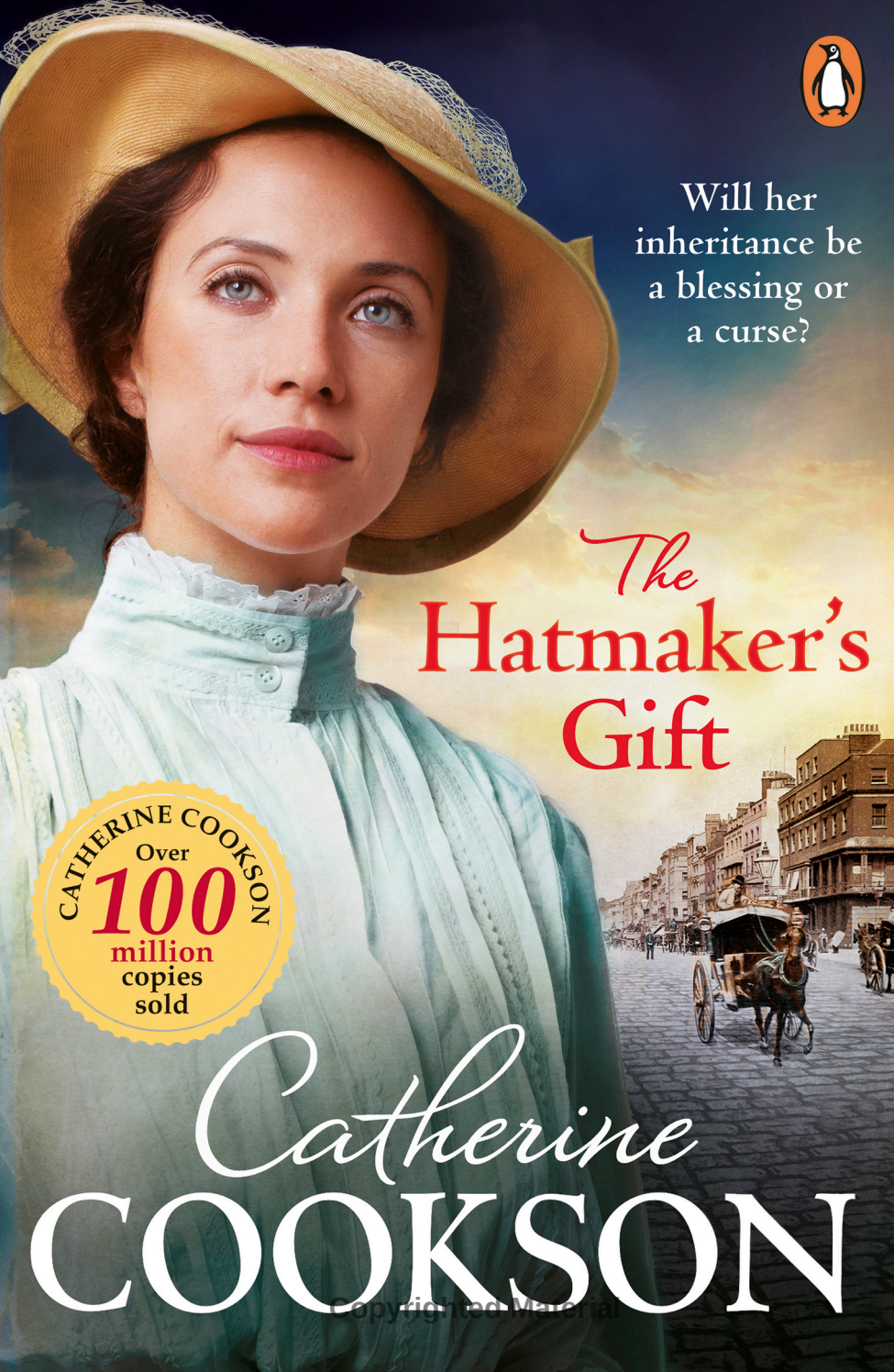
Will her inheritance be a blessing or a curse?
The Hatmaker's Gift
CATHERINE COOKSON
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Dame Catherine Cookson was born in 1906. From an early age Catherine was determined to become a writer. She wrote her first short story when she was eleven, sending it off to the *South Shields Gazette*.

She left school at thirteen and worked in domestic service and in a workhouse before moving to Hastings. At thirty-four she married Tom Cookson, a local grammar-school master. In the years that followed Catherine suffered several miscarriages and fell into a depression. She returned to writing to recover and joined the local writers' group for encouragement. Her first book, *Kate Hannigan* (1950), was partly autobiographical.

Although she was originally acclaimed as a regional writer, Catherine's readership soon began to spread around the world. Catherine's novels have been translated into more than twenty languages and over 100 million copies of her books have been sold. Catherine died shortly before her ninety-second birthday in June 1998 having completed 104 works, nine of which were published posthumously.

By the time of her death Catherine Cookson had received an OBE, the Freedom of the Borough of South Tyneside, an honorary degree from the University of Newcastle and the Royal Society of Literature's award for Best Regional Novel of the Year.

Catherine Cookson was the most borrowed author in UK public libraries for twenty years – a sure testament to the ongoing popularity of her stirring, timeless novels.

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Fenwick Houses
Heritage of Folly
The Garment
The Fen Tiger
The Blind Miller
House of Men
Hannah Massey
The Long Corridor
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Katie Mulholland
The Round Tower
The Nice Bloke
The Glassmaker's Daughter
The Invitation
The Dwelling Place
Her Secret Son
Pure as the Lily
The Mallen Streak
The Mallen Girl
The Mallen Litter
The Invisible Cord
The Gambling Man
The Tide of Life
The Slow Awakening
The Iron Façade
The Girl
The Cinder Path
Miss Martha Mary Crawford
The Man Who Cried
Tilly Trotter
Tilly Trotter Wed
Tilly Trotter Widowed
The Whip
Hamilton
The Black Velvet Gown
Goodbye Hamilton
A Dinner of Herbs
Harold
The Moth
Bill Bailey
Bill Bailey's Lot
Bill Bailey's Daughter
The Parson's Daughter
The Cultured Handmaiden
The Smuggler's Secret
The Black Candle
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Daughter of Scandal
My Beloved Son
The Rag Maid
The House of Women
The Voice of an Angel
The Year of the Virgins
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Justice is a Woman
The Tinker's Girl
A Ruthless Need
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BOOK ONE

Beginnings

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PART ONE

1879

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1

Emily Pearson cast her eyes around the bare room from which the last piece of furniture had just been taken out to the horse-driven removal van, and she asked herself how they had ever been able to move about in that room or, for that matter, in the bedroom, or in the kitchen, for the contents of the small house had filled the van. From where she was standing she could see through the uncurtained window into the road, where the driver of the van was urging his horse into motion with the flick of his whip.

Thinking, That's that, she now took a key from her bag and walked towards the door; but there she stopped and turned, and again she gazed around the room. Was she sorry to leave this house? No. No. Yet she had been born here, and she had lived happily here until she was sixteen, when her mother had died. She could say, too, that she had lived somewhat contentedly during the following two years. Then she had married Jimmy Pearson and had spent the first night of her married life in that bedroom over there.

Marriage had startled her, frightened her. It wasn't as she expected it would be, full of tender loving, and evenings sitting by the fire, he describing his day at Parker's warehouse, and she responding by telling him about some of the customers at Madam Arkwright's, milliners. But it didn't turn out like that. He was dry, he would say, after a day in the warehouse, too dry for talking without something with which to oil his throat. True, he had invited her to go to the pub with him. But what did that mean? Sitting in the snug with women to whom she couldn't talk. It was as if they spoke a

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foreign language. After the second visit she had put her foot down, saying she had something better to do than sit with a lot of blowzy women, while he golloped beer next door in the men-only bar.

The following morning she had arrived at The Bandbox for the first time with a discoloured cheek. It was on that morning, too, that Mrs Arkwright had stopped being madam and had behaved more like a mother, for she had upbraided her for her silliness in being taken in by such a common individual as that warehouse man. Hadn't she warned her she was out of his class? Her mother had brought her up respectable and she herself had aimed to instil some style into her; but now here she was being treated like any waterfront slut.

She could recall the scene now: Mrs Arkwright, who never seemed to lose her composure, gripping her by the shoulders and saying, 'The next time he raises his hand to you pick up something, anything, and hit him with it, or throw it at him. At first they try it on, but it quickly develops into a habit. If you don't do as I say, by the end of the year you won't be able to see out of either eye. I know the type.'

And she had been right. In the middle of the following week, when she had refused to give him five shillings out of her savings for him to back another sure winner, he had lifted his hand to her. But she had been prepared, and she had whipped up a brass candlestick from the low mantelpiece and as his fist was about to come in contact with her face he felt the weight of the brass across his knuckles. So fiercely had she aimed the blow that he cried out, then stood away from her, his pain not unmixed with amazement. The quiet, docile young lass who, as he had bragged to his mates, would do what he said, or else, was now confronting him and telling him what she would do if he dared to raise his hand again to her; and, what was more, that he wasn't getting any of her pay, but that she wanted some of his to keep the house . . .

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Emily now leaned back against the door, closed her eyes, and bit on her lip as she savoured her recall of the scene. It had been the most satisfactory moment of their marriage, and in a way it had brought her out of her girlhood into womanhood, much more so than the marriage bed had done.

But then, following this incident, life had become almost unbearable. There came the period when he did not return home at night. But she had been glad of this: it was the respite from which no brass candlestick could have protected her. Then came the day when he said to her, 'You're on your own from now on. I'm not coming back.' And when an expected reply was not forthcoming from her he had blustered, 'Who d'you think you are, anyway? Your old man was nothing but a stoker on an old tramp steamer.' But to this she did reply, yelling at him, 'My father was second mate on a cargo boat and he was a gentleman.'

She had always thought of her father as a gentleman. He had been drowned when she was five years old. Apparently she had seen him only twice, on each occasion after his return from a long voyage, and she had cried both times when the strange man held her.

It had been her mother who had imbued her with this feeling about her father: 'In all ways your dad was a gentleman,' she would continually say to her, creating the picture in her mind of him as a gentle sailorman, and more so as she later realised that it had been her father's half-pay notes which, added to her mother's earnings, had helped to buy this house.

It was on that night of parting from her husband that he brought up the ownership of the house by saying, 'And you try to sell this place, mind, and I'm having my share, if not the lot. What's the wife's is the husband's. In fact I could sell it over your head. And I will if you try me too far and interfere with me life.'

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As yet she knew nothing about the law as regards women's rights, so she had remained quiet. This was something to ask Mrs Arkwright about.

When she had told Mrs Arkwright that he had left her, that lady had said immediately, 'That's that! Good riddance! But don't go in for any legal separation, go for a divorce.'

Divorce! That was only for the upper class. Yet, with the guidance of her mentor that's what she had achieved. Although the whole procedure had taken nearly three years, the fact that he had three children by the woman with whom he was living had helped matters, also it dispelled his idea that he could still claim on the property that was hers.

That the money she had received from selling the house had gone mostly on solicitors' fees for fighting her case didn't matter any more, for she was now going to make her permanent home with Mrs Arkwright. What was more, she was going to be taken as partner into the business. And what a partnership! And what a house! In fact, what houses!

Now, she moved from the door, opened it, and stepped into the street, put the key in the lock and turned it, then muttered, 'Goodbye. Goodbye, old house, you've served your purpose.'

After five minutes' walk she boarded a horse-bus, and there being few passengers at this time of day she sat on one of the wooden-slatted seats at the front and gazed out of the window. She always did this, very often without seeing where the bus was going, so accustomed had she become to this journey over the years.

When she had first taken this route with her mother it had only been a five-minute ride to Bertram Close, where Mrs Arkwright had set up her first Bandbox. Then later it had seemed a long jump, yes indeed, it had seemed a long jump to that tall, narrow house in Maddock Street. But they hadn't stayed long there, only two years. The stairs had been too much for everyone: two rooms on each

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floor and three floors; and, what was more, it wasn't suitable for their kind of business. But the new premises, Frontlea House in Willington Place, were, even though it was certainly not a business area as such. It was a small residential district, the occupants of the houses being definitely real middle-class. And it could be said that Mrs Mabel Arkwright had just squeezed into it, for number thirty-five was the last house and only partly in Willington Place. Being situated on the corner its other half extended into Barclay Street and had a small business window, which set it in line with a number of shops in this particular street. Yet the businesses were all of some standing, with such as a high-class florist, a stamp and coin collector and, at the far end of the street from Mrs Arkwright's, a gentlemen's hatter, which caused that lady some amusement.

But now, after occupying Frontlea House, number thirty-five, for four years, the business lady, Mrs Arkwright, astounded the residents of Willington Place by taking not only a lease of ninety-nine years on these premises, but also a similar lease on the one next door, in which Rear Admiral Proggett had lived for years.

Now who would think there was so much money to be made out of hats? But of course there was this other business that was rather mysterious. There was talk of the garments in her ladies' outfitting department being not quite, well . . . new. Yet no-one in Willington Place would have dreamt about investigating this for themselves; it was just what they had come to learn from a friend of a friend.

After three minutes' walk from the horse-bus Emily entered number thirty-five by the shining dark-green-painted door, which colour was picked out in the window sills on each side and on the iron rails that fronted a small patch of garden. She stepped into a small lobby, then opened the frosted-glass door, and so entered what always surprised a new visitor: an extraordinarily large hall. It was an odd shape, which had been achieved by

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removing a sitting-room wall and thus leaving the entire space in the shape of a stunted L. A number of doors led off the hall and a broad staircase gently rose from the far end of it.

The walls of the hall were covered with red-flock paper and the two long windows, one each side of the door, were draped in a grey silk material, the colour repeated in the three small couches and two chairs, which were upholstered in a heavy brocade. There was a round table in the middle of the room and, set in strategic positions, three tall hat-stands holding large ribbon-and-flower-bedecked models.

Emily paused and looked about her. There was the sound of muted voices coming from a room opposite her, and from one to the far right, which meant there were clients being attended to, special ones – those who paid up within a reasonable time.

She had turned to move towards the corridor to her left when one of the doors to the right of the hall opened, and a laughing voice said, 'He'll kill me. The first thing he'll say will be, "You can't wear three at once." Well, all I'll do is put the blame on you, Miss Esther: I'll tell him to come and try to get past you with one hat . . . Oh, there you are, Mrs Pearson.' The big, over-dressed, florid lady sailed towards Emily, continuing to explain her apparent extravagance: 'I came in for a toque and go out with three pokes. That's another of Wilson Fairbairn's sayings. Anyway, what odds? What are we here for if not to wear hats? You're looking very well. I haven't seen you for some time, nor Madam Arkwright. No' – she now leant her big smiling face close to Emily's – 'I only glimpse Madam these days when I'm settling up.'

'Oh, Mrs Fairbairn, Madam would be pleased to see you at any time, you know that. You are her oldest and most favoured customer.'

'Not so much of the oldest, dear, not so much of the oldest.' She was wagging a hand in front of Emily's face, and Emily laughed, saying, 'That's but a saying. Some

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people are ageless, and you, Mrs Fairbairn, I'm positive, are one of them, because you were one of the ladies I met when I first came to work for Madam, and you haven't altered one jot.'

'You know, Mrs Pearson, you talk just like Wilson Fairbairn. I don't believe a word of it. But,' and now her voice changed to an exaggerated whisper, 'I like it, you know. I like to hear it, nevertheless. Goodbye for now, my dear. Goodbye. You'll see I get those tomorrow?'

'Yes. Yes, of course.' Emily swung round and opened the door; then passed into the lobby and opened the outer door. And the big lady, looking up the street, cried, 'Ah, there's Benson. He's been trotting the carriage round the block.' Then, turning her laughing face to Emily, she added, 'He hates that. Upsets the horses, he says. So I stay all the longer.'

Emily watched the florid figure trip as lightly as a young girl down the three steps, along the short path, through the iron gate and on to the pavement to where her carriage was drawing up; and she did not close the door until the carriage was being driven away.

Esther McCann was waiting for Emily and remarked, 'By! she's a card. But you know, I could love her. I heard the other day that his firm's in a bad way. I wonder if she knows?'

'Likely she does but has decided to take no notice,' said Emily, nodding her head now. 'Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof . . . How's things been?'

'Not bad at all, quite good; in fact. Lady Steele was in.'

'Oh, that was nice . . . just for hats?'

'Yes, for the present. Funny about titles, isn't it? There's her without tuppence, so to speak, and having to keep up the style, but she's got no edge, and there's the other one, Lady Wearmore, I can't stand her. I really can't.'

'We're both of the same mind, Esther . . . Where's Madam?'

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'Now where would you expect? She's never out of next door. But it's going to be fine, isn't it?'

'Yes, grand.' Then lowering her voice, Emily said, 'Before you and Lena go off tonight Madam would like a word with you. It's really to finalise things, you know, about Lena's taking over the alterations and your giving her a hand, because you know almost as much as she does about it. But the point is, there'll have to be another two trained for the shop here and Madam wants your opinion as to who we should bring into the workshop.'

Esther McCann nodded, saying, 'Yes. Yes, we were talking about that ourselves earlier on. And I can speak for Lena and for meself an' all when I say we would rather be doing the alterations upstairs than carrying on down here. Although' – her voice changed – 'not that we don't like it, but you know what I mean.'

'Yes, I know what you mean. I'd rather do that myself, too. Still, hats are my business so I'd better stick to what I know best. What do you say?'

They both laughed as they said almost together, 'We say, right!'

She was still smiling to herself as she made her way along the short corridor and through the new door that led into the recently acquired house and into a half-panelled room that was bare of furniture, from which she entered the main hall. This, too, was panelled, but from floor to ceiling, and was furnished with an ornamental hall table, a tall hat-stand, and three slat-backed chairs.

She opened the door leading into the drawing-room. This, too, was furnished, but so sparsely as to suggest a feeling of space, which was further emphasised by the pale-blue-flock-patterned wallpaper.

Not finding Mrs Arkwright there, she entered the dining-room. Here was more panelling, but only to chair-back height. The room had an already-lived-in appearance, right to the silver entrée dishes on the

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rosewood sideboard. This room had, as Mrs Arkwright termed it, an eatable look.

Emily did not bother going down the passage and to the door that led into the basement, where Mary Pollock, the cook, having been reluctantly transferred from next door, would likely at this moment be showing her spleen and still be going for poor little Alice Milton, who was not only termed her assistant but also the housemaid; rather, she turned about and went upstairs.

The stairs as yet were uncarpeted, as was the landing, and she was walking across this to where the attic stairs led off when a muffled voice hailed her, saying, 'You'll not find me up there, Emily.'

She was smiling as she pushed open Mrs Arkwright's bedroom door. 'How did you know it was me?' she said. 'It could have been any one of us.'

'Oh, I know your footsteps by now. And anyway, only you would expect to find me rummaging again in the attics. But my! the things they've thrown away over the years, you wouldn't believe. D'you know there's a couple of Sheraton chairs there? The mice have been at the seats, but what does that matter? A bit of tapestry and they'll be as good as new . . . Now what are you staring at? My old tin trunk opened at last? You've been curious about it for years, haven't you? And your mother before you. And why I've always kept it in my room covered with a chenille cloth? Oh, I know, I know.' The elderly woman flapped her hands towards Emily now, then went on, 'Well, to put it in a nutshell, I've kept it all these years to remind me not to get big-headed. One day, after I'd had a slice of luck, I was for clearing it out and dumping it. In fact, I did clear it out, and banged down the lid, and there it sat staring at me. And you know what it said to me?'

Smiling softly, Emily shook her head but made no reply.

'Well, it said, put a devil on horseback and it'll ride to hell. And I'd seen this happen so often with people who'd come into a bit of money. What did they do but

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cast off their past and their own folk with it. Anyway, enough about me. How did it go?'

'Very smoothly. They just managed to get the odds and ends into the van.'

'I bet they did. You were mad for letting that lot go for five pounds. Twenty-five would have been more like it. You had one or two nice pieces, you know. I gave your mother that horse-hair sofa.'

Emily made no comment on this, for the horse-hair sofa had caused both laughter and pain; laughter because her mother couldn't refuse it, nor could she give it away in case Mrs Arkwright paid them a visit. And no matter what material they used, the horse-hair would find its way through the material. Her mother used to say that they were dray horses in that sofa, those with the big hairy feet, and they were fighting to get out.

'Anyway,' Mrs Arkwright said as she now rose from her squatting position and sat on a low chair to the side of the tin trunk, 'that's that episode of yours closed, and good and proper. You should have done it years ago. In fact, as I told you, you should never have started it. I took his measure from the first sight of him. But you wouldn't listen, would you?'

'No, I wouldn't listen,' Emily agreed, 'and I learned my lesson, as you've often told me.'

'Yes. Yes, I did. But it was only for your own good. Are you still going to use his name?'

'No. I'm going to go back to Ratcliffe.'

'Well, that's sensible. But don't call yourself miss, keep to missis and your ring on your finger. It'll be a safeguard.'

At this Emily gave a short laugh, saying, 'Against what?'

'Don't be stupid! woman. Don't tell me you don't look in the glass, and the long mirror. With a figure like yours . . .'

'I haven't any figure, which you've told me for years. You used to say I could even do with carbuncles

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up here' – she pointed to her breasts – 'to make mine stand out.'

'Yes. Yes, I did, and I talk through the fat of my neck sometimes. But you mark my words, there'll be a day, and not long ahead, when all the big backsides and the battleship breasts will be cut off amidships. I can hear the Rear Admiral turning in his grave. Remember' – she almost choked on her next words – 'when he was in his cups we could hear him through the wall, yelling his nautical terms? He was always yelling at somebody called Harry, wasn't he?'

Emily too was laughing now, so much so that she had to wipe her eyes as she muttered, 'And he used to swear like a trooper; but when you met him in the street he was such a gentleman, so courteous, and he had a lovely voice.'

'Yes' – Mrs Arkwright nodded now – 'he was a gentleman. He once kissed my hand, you know. Yes; yes, he did.' She was nodding. 'It was when I first set up next door and I invited him in to prove that his neighbour was respectable, and as he was leaving he kissed my hand. Yes. Yes, he was a gentleman.'

Mrs Arkwright now paused a moment before saying soberly, 'And here's another gentleman . . . or was.' She bent and picked up a photograph that was lying among others at the side of the tin trunk and, handing it to Emily, she said, 'You haven't seen him before, have you?'

Emily looked at the photograph. It was of a tall, quite handsome-looking man with a slight moustache and a mass of fair hair. And when she looked enquiringly at Mrs Arkwright, that lady said, 'He was a gentleman, indeed, and in more ways than one: he was a gentleman's gentleman. But apart from that, he was a gentle man. That was my Oscar, my husband.'

'He . . . he is very handsome, very smart.' Emily's voice was soft.

'I'm going to tell you something now. Sit down there.' Mrs Arkwright pointed to the chair. 'I've always meant

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to tell you, because you know very little about my early life, do you?'

'Nothing at all really,' Emily said, the while shaking her head slowly.

'Well, my dear, I was a lady's-maid. Yes, a lady's-maid. I dropped into that just by chance. I was put into service when I was twelve. They were upper middle class, no lineage whatever, simply got there through business.' She pulled a face now. 'Dreadful, isn't it, to get into the middle class through business? Tut, tut! Tut, tut!' And Emily smiled as she added her confirmation of the statement: 'Disgraceful, really. There should be a law against it.'

'Many a true word spoken in jest. And there nearly was, my dear. Anyway, as I was saying, I started when I was twelve, in the kitchen, but by the time I was seventeen I was second housemaid. The mistress died – the master had been dead for some years – and now there was only the one daughter, Miss May, left. She was then thirty and rather prim. And one day it should happen she left the house to go to tea with some friends, but on the way she ran into a storm and she bid her coachman return home. But there was a bigger storm when she got in, because there she found her lady's-maid and the footman disporting themselves. And where do you think they were at it?' Mrs Arkwright's face stretched, her blue eyes became round, her mouth was drawn into a thin line, and she held this pose for some seconds before enlightening Emily: 'On Miss May's own bed. Oh! what a day! What a day! What a day! Screams and faints all round. But Miss Elsie Wilson went out and into that storm quicker than the lightning was flashing, and someone had to go and comfort Miss May. Now, as I said, I was second housemaid. But the first housemaid was Jane Battle, although it should have been Jane Sniffles, for her nose was in a perpetual state of running, and Miss May couldn't stand the sight of her; and so, who had to go and see to milady but your

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humble servant. And that's how it started. She took to me and I took to her and her funny little ways; and so it went on for three years. And then one day she happened to go to a garden party at a friend's house, and who should be passing through but a Major who had been discharged from the Indian Army because of a foot injury. He was a man in his forties and she was thirty-three. It was known that she had never had a man-friend in her life before, but she fell for this one, hook, line and sinker, and he for her; and two years later they were married.'

She smiled at Emily while continuing to finger the picture of her husband. And then she said, 'As it says in the Bible – And so it came to pass – they were married and went to the South of France for their honeymoon. And it should happen also that the Major was accompanied by his man, and his new wife by her lady's-maid,' and she now dug her breast with her middle finger, before going on, 'Oscar had been the Major's batman in the Army and had been discharged with him, through rope-pulling, as he was wont to say. You know, Emily—' She now laid down the photograph among the others, but she didn't take her eyes off it as she went on, 'There are times in your life when you say, that was the happiest period I've ever known. And that month in that lovely hotel outside Nice, Oscar and I fell in love. He was twelve years older than me. It was almost a repeat of the Major's situation, although I was only twenty-three.'

She paused here as if gathering the past back into her mind before she went on, 'While the happy couple were out driving or sailing, we, after duties were done, would stroll along the beach and we would talk and laugh together. We could always laugh together. And it was such a heavenly place. The hotel had only fifteen bedrooms; but I remember the proprietors were so nice, so welcoming, nothing was too much trouble, and that went for the staff, too. Oh yes, it was a wonderful time, and a week after we returned to England, Oscar asked me to marry him. As I recall, he had to put it to the Major

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first, and the Major was for it. But not so Miss May. Funny, I never could think of her as anything else but Miss May, because to me marriage didn't seem to alter her much: she remained prim, if you know what I mean. At first she said, oh no, I couldn't keep the position if I married because I might have children, but at the same time she didn't want to lose me. Anyway, the Major must have talked her round because she then gave her consent. I can always remember what she said.' Mrs Arkwright's head now began to bob. '"Mabel," she said, "I hope you will find no necessity to have a family." Funny way of putting it, wasn't it? But anyway, we didn't have a family, although it wasn't for lack of trying.'

She now looked at Emily as she said, 'But she had one, poor dear, when she was thirty-eight, and she died during the process. The baby lived twelve days. It was a beautiful boy, and the poor Major, he was so cut up and all the zest went out of his life, because he had really loved her. Although we found out later she was his second wife; he had lost the first through death, too. But that was through one of the diseases they catch in India. Anyway, it was from then on our life seemed to centre around him, so much so that he couldn't seem to bear either of us out of his sight for very long. And he talked to me by the hour of his dear wife, although he never called her by name and he seemed to think I knew so much about her; that, in fact, I'd grown up with her. It was unfortunate that she hadn't had any close relatives. And neither had he, except a nephew somewhere in Switzerland and a cousin, a very old lady down in Dorset.

'Anyway, I was thirty-two when he died and Oscar about forty-four, and at the time we were living in Northumberland in the Major's old home. The Little Manor, it was called. It wasn't a big estate, some forty acres or so. It was a lonely place, well outside of the village. But on the day he was buried all the inhabitants of that village followed the hearse, for he was highly

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respected. As for Oscar and me, well, we didn't know where to put ourselves, we felt so lost. And then came the reading of the will.'

She sat back in her chair now and nodded at Emily as she said, 'Life's funny, you know, girl. When you think you're facing a blank wall and you can't see ahead, a door suddenly opens and sometimes you're blinded with the light. And that's what happened to us. You see, we were worried because we knew we would have to find other service. We hadn't much saved up because our wages weren't great. We had our uniform and our keep and we had to take that into consideration. We felt that the master would leave us a little bit, but then we thought he hadn't much to leave. Well, we knew he hadn't because it took him all his time to keep the house and staff and the little estate going, because from what Oscar gleaned he refused to dip into his wife's money whilst she was alive, and then I think he felt reluctant to do so after she died. He was certainly a very high-principled gentleman, was the Major. Anyway, there we were all sitting in the hall and the solicitor started to read the will. He read that each servant was to have a hundred pounds. Well, that seemed to please everybody; and he read out the names, but ours weren't included. There was a thousand pounds to his nephew and a thousand pounds to his cousin. Then, in a special piece of reading, the solicitor announced: "To my faithful servant and friend Oscar Arkwright, I leave five hundred pounds and what jewellery I possess; to his wife, Mabel Arkwright, who has cared for me so tenderly since my dear wife died, I leave two hundred pounds." Seven hundred pounds between us. And the Major's timepiece and chain and cufflinks and odds and ends, all except his medals. These were to go back with the remainder of his money and property to his regiment. The money was to be mainly used, as I understood it, for the wounded men in the regimental hospital. And you know what Oscar and I did when we heard what he had left us? We both cried,

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Oscar unashamedly. He cried without making a sound and the tears ran down his face. And so we were set.'

She now drew in a long breath before adding, 'I've always meant to tell you that story, and I have a reason for telling it now, but that will come later.'

'Oh, Mrs Arkwright.' Emily rose swiftly from her chair and, going to the elderly woman, took her hand in both of hers and pressed it, saying, 'Thank you. Thank you for telling me. I . . . I might as well admit that I've often wondered about your life and how you started. It's like a fairytale.'

'Oh no, my dear, it was no fairytale, it was work all along the line, I mean from the time we started the business. Oscar had said to me, "What do you want to do, girl?" and I said, "You know what I'd like to do, Oscar? I'd like to start a hat shop." And he said immediately, "Why not, my dear, because you've got such a touch with hats. Look at those you made for the mistress. It must have saved her pounds." And so we bought our first premises and the real hard work began. Your mother was one of my first trimmers: and then you came along. Well, you know the rest. But at last I've got what I always wanted: a house detached from my business. And we'll make it lovely and homely, you and I.' She now put up her other hand and touched Emily's cheek, and there was a note of pleading in her voice when she said, 'You will stay with me, won't you, dear?'

'Stay with you? Of course, of course. It's all settled. Where else would I go? Who have I got but you?'

'Huh! Huh!' Mrs Arkwright pushed her away almost roughly, saying, 'I'm not going to say you're footloose and fancy free, but you're free, and you're bonny, more than bonny, my dear. And now, when it gets around there's no impediment, you'll have them here like jackals after you.'

'Oh, nonsense, nonsense. Anyway, don't forget what you once said about me.' Now it was her turn to wag her finger at her mistress: '"You only look attractive when

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you're smiling," you said. "You want to take that stiff, haughty look off your face."'

'Well, yes, I did say it,' admitted Mrs Arkwright, 'because I was thinking of the effect you would have on the customers. And I've always told you, you should never look superior to a client nor outdo a client in dress.'

'I know all that, but it's years ago you dished out that advice. And I've learned a lot since then.'

'Yes. Yes, you have, my dear . . . Now, after all this rigmarole that would fill a book, what about a cup of tea? Oh, there's one thing I must show you. I threw it in the cupboard there.' She pointed across the room to an old Dutch wardrobe, saying, 'It was in a box lying on top of twenty others. I'll have to get them out and see what I can do with them. And by the way, there's some good material up there, too; some of it time-worn in parts, but we'll sort it out.'

Emily opened the wardrobe door and immediately paused at sight of a hat lying by itself on the shelf opposite. It was a very large hat. Presently, she drew it from the shelf, saying, 'You found this up in the attic?'

'Yes; what am I telling you?'

'Good gracious! I've always thought straws look bare without trimming, but this one! This one looks naked. I don't think it's ever had a trimming on, either.' She examined it. 'And what a strange colour! How on earth would they get that colour?'

'Oh, a mixture of white, yellow, and light brown, I would say.'

'It's a straw, but it's stiff.'

'Well, it would have been dipped and must have been well dipped, I should imagine, to be as stiff as it still is. What do you think of it?'

Emily put a hand in the crown and turned the hat slowly around before she said, 'Well, it's very unusual. It really is a beautiful straw; and the colour, I've . . . I've never seen anything like it. Not quite corn colour, much lighter.'

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'Pale gold, I would say.'

'Yes. Yes.' Emily nodded. 'Pale gold. This side's a bit bent. But if it's been in a box for years, it's a wonder it isn't crushed up.'

'Yes, that's what I thought, too,' said Mrs Arkwright. 'But it was laid flat on top of the others. As to the tilt of the brim, I think it sets it off. Anyway, it could be straightened under the steam kettle. What do you think we should trim it with?'

'You mean to trim it? Somehow it looks just right naked.' She started to giggle, and felt compelled to add an explanation: 'Well, it does look naked, doesn't it?'

'Yes,' Mrs Arkwright joined in her chuckling. 'As you say, it looks naked as it is. What do you think we should trim it with?'

'I don't know. Funny, but somehow I can't see it trimmed.'

'Oh well, it won't be sold naked. You can take my word for that.'

Impulsively now, Emily went across to the dressing-table mirror and, sitting down, she put the hat on at a slight angle, and then sat staring at herself in the mirror, before slowly turning about on the stool and facing Mrs Arkwright. It was a matter of seconds before that lady exclaimed, 'Good gracious! It could be made for you, that hat. It picks up the colour of your skin.'

'You always said I hadn't any colour in my skin to speak of.'

'Well, that's what I mean. They both match now. Anyway, we'll sell that, my dear. We'll stick that on a main stand right opposite the front door. It will have to have a little trimming of some kind on it, though.'

'Oh no, no.' Emily got to her feet now, protesting, 'Don't put anything on it.'

'Oh, don't be silly.' Mrs Arkwright pulled herself to the edge of the chair. 'Can you see me or anybody else in this country selling a hat without it being swamped in ribbons or flowers or feathers or some such?'

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'Yes. Yes. Start a new vogue.'

'That'll be the day. No, it'll have to have some kind of trimming.'

Emily now took the hat off and again she put her hand in the crown and turned it around; then quietly she said, 'A flat bow of wide green watered silk ribbon lying on the back, just there.' She pointed. 'Not too big, mustn't come over the edge of the brim in any way, nor creep up the crown; just let it lie flat.'

The older woman and the younger one stood now, the hat between them, watching it slowly revolving on Emily's hand. And Mrs Arkwright said quietly, 'Yes. Yes, I think you're right. It'll have to be a soft green, the apple variety. And it'll have to have a name; the hat, I mean.'

'The Golden Straw, how about that?'

'Yes. Yes.' Mrs Arkwright nodded. 'Yes, The Golden Straw. That's clever. And would you like to take a bet on how long it's going to be there on that stand before being put in a bandbox?'

'It will have to be a large bandbox,' Emily said, then added, 'What about half-a-crown it goes within the next month?'

'I bet you five shillings it doesn't go within the next three months.'

'Oh . . . Well, I'll take that on. Yes. Yes, I'll take that on. But no trimmings, just the bow, mind.'

'As you say, miss, no trimmings, just the bow. But wait, what about if a client takes a fancy to it and wants it trimmed up?'

'Well, we'll have to dissuade her otherwise with that silence, you know, that speaks louder than words when clients ask what we think.'

'You have very little left to learn, have you, Mrs Ratcliffe?'

'Very little where hats are concerned, Madam Arkwright. And you should take credit for that, shouldn't you?'

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'Go on with you. Go on.' Mrs Arkwright pushed Emily towards the door and followed her, saying, 'I could die in this house and nobody would bring me a cup of tea. Let's get downstairs. But don't take that thing with you.' She snatched the hat from Emily's hand and flung it on to the bed, saying, 'I've got a funny feeling about that thing; I'll likely lose my five bob. I might be sorry I ever found it. Go on, get yourself out. It'll be there when we come back.'

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'What is it, doctor?'

'A heart attack.'

'Oh!' Emily shook her head slowly. 'That's serious.'

'Well, it can be in many cases, but she'll survive; only she'll have to be careful. Is there a room down below that could be made into a bedroom? because the stairs aren't going to help her in the future.'

Emily thought for a moment, then said, 'Oh yes, yes; there's the study. It leads into the other house, but it could be made into a nice bedroom.'

'Well, I would see to it.'

'She'll be all right?' Emily asked tentatively now. 'I mean . . . ?'

'Yes, I know what you mean. And yes, she'll be all right, as long as she takes care. But this is a warning. All such attacks are warnings. The next time it happens she mightn't get off so easily, and as she is subject to bronchitis she should be extra careful . . . Has she been worrying about anything recently?'

'Not that I know of.'

They were standing in the hall and he was looking about him. 'Never could understand why she wanted to take on this place,' he commented. 'Wasn't next door big enough for her? There were plenty of living-rooms upstairs. Is she going in for buying property now?'

Emily looked straight into the doctor's face. She had never cared much for him. Not only was his manner brusque, but also he was nosy. And so she answered without satisfying his questioning: 'Why she took this place, doctor, was simply because she wanted a home to live in, not a business house with people coming

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and going all the time and surrounded by the evidence of her work.'

'Huh! Well, to my mind, she shouldn't have been concerned, because her work, as you call it, has put her somewhere, hasn't it? Hats. Who would think there was money in hats? Stupid falderals, in my opinion: women going around looking as if they were growing gardens on their heads, or had been bird shooting. I actually saw someone the other day with a complete bird perched on top of her bonnet. My God! the money some women must spend.' He now buttoned up the collar of his coat, picked up his hard hat from the hall table, then added his final comment, 'Some people profit from others' vanity, don't they? Well, keep her quiet. I'll be in tomorrow.'

Emily opened the door. She did not say, 'Good day,' or 'Thank you, doctor'; and when he gave her one last look she returned it and just as coldly. But then to her utter surprise he thrust his face towards her and, sounding even jovial, he said, 'You don't like me, do you? But don't worry, you're not alone.' And on this he turned from her and walked down the stone steps, through the gate and into the hansom cab; and the driver, perched high on his box, flicked his whip and away they went.

When at last she closed the door, she had to resist the desire to bang it, and she asked herself why she had stood there for so long. He was right; she didn't like him. Doctor Smeaton would never have acted like that, but this partner of his was a detestable individual, and had much to learn, in her mind, before he could be considered a real doctor. She imagined he couldn't be thirty years old. Well, whatever his age, he still had a lot to learn, at least in how to deal with people. She recalled his first visit when he had stood in the hall next door and gazed at The Golden Straw perched between but above two elaborately decorated hats. And he had grinned as he said, 'What's happened to that one? Somebody forgotten to put the clothes on it?'

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She had lost her bet over the straw hat. Many had remarked on it, but only one person had asked to try it on, and then had actually shuddered at the result, and her comment was, 'I can't see it suiting anyone, even if it was trimmed. It's such an unusual shape, so large, and has no height to the crown, to speak of.'

She couldn't quite understand the feeling she had come to have for this particular hat. And when the three months were up and Mrs Arkwright had won her bet, she had magnanimously said to her, 'You may keep your five bob; and besides that, I am making you a present of the hat. Anyway, right from the beginning I felt it must have been made many years ago exactly for you or somebody like you. Although it will always puzzle me why it had never been trimmed and was laid so carefully on top of that box.'

The hat now reposed in a large bandbox in her bedroom, and every now and again she would take it out, put it on her head and sit before the mirror adjusting it this way and that. And the more she did this the more she became so enamoured of the straw as to ask herself why hats had to be larded with so much flippancy, feathers, flowers and ribbons of every description and very often piled one on top of the other. The only shapes that didn't get imprisoned in such a way were the winter felts. Ribbons, yes, and a feather here and there. But then she recalled that some clients demanded a very large quantity of feathers on their velours, with ribbons trailing from the back, the fashion at the moment. And with regard to current fashion, there was the new corset. In her opinion, whoever had designed it must be a descendant of a member of the Spanish Inquisition.

When she voiced this to Mrs Arkwright, that lady had laughed heartily and said, 'Oh, I know where you got that idea. You've been reading those books that were left on the shelves downstairs. You're an odd girl, and funny.' Then she had added: 'You throw aside *The Ladies' Journal* and yet sit reading that kind of stuff.'

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On that particular day she had looked in the mirror and had nodded to her reflection as she thought, 'Yes, I suppose I must appear odd,' but as for being funny, she could recognise nothing funny about her thinking: that was made up of shadowy thoughts and questions and almost a craving for something that stemmed from a feeling of deep loneliness, which she couldn't understand, for her daily life was a contradiction, it being filled with people. But what she did understand was she was tied to this business, to this house, and to Mrs Arkwright. But then, wasn't that a good thing? She recalled she had never given herself an answer but had got hastily up and gone about the business of the day.

And now again she was dealing with the business of the day. First of all, she went back upstairs and into Mrs Arkwright's bedroom, saying, 'I don't like that fellow, you know. And you know what he said?'

'No; what did he say?'

'Well' – she bent over the bed – 'he pushed his face almost into mine, like this, and he said, "You don't like me, do you?"'

'He never did!' Mrs Arkwright laughed softly.

'He did; and then he walked away, without giving me the chance to say either yes or no.'

'Huh! Anyway, what else did he say? I mean, about me. Am I for the box?'

'Yes, in about ten or fifteen or twenty years' time, I would say. But I wouldn't choose the wood yet.'

'He thinks I'm spoofing about the pain?'

Emily's attitude and voice both changed now as she said quietly, 'No, he doesn't think you're spoofing about any pain. You've had a heart attack, and if you don't want another, and soon, you've got to take it very quietly' – she held up her hand – 'at least for a time, until you've properly pulled round. And what's more, he's ordered that you sleep downstairs. No more trotting up and down.' And again her hand went up as she said, 'I emphasise, it's just for a time. Anyway, I'm going to

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see Alice, and I'll get Molly Stock to help her. We'll turn the study into a bedroom for the time being.'

'You're going to do no such thing.'

'But we are, Mrs Arkwright, and you can do nothing about it, only hold your tongue and rest.'

Mabel Arkwright lowered her head, and when she made no tart reply to this, Emily went to her again and sat on the side of the bed and, taking her hand, spoke to her gently: 'It is just a temporary thing, and it will help all round. It's the nearest room to next door, and I'll be able to pop in and out all the time as if you were actually there. And then when you're on your feet again it'll only be a step for you to put on your bossing boots.'

'Well!' – the head came up – 'it needs somebody to do some bossing. You're not stiff enough.'

'No, I'm not when you're there, but you leave me on my own and you'll see the difference. Anyway, there's no need for pushing with any of them; they're all such good workers. We're very, very lucky, you know. And they'll do anything for you. They're all upset; they can't imagine you being ill. It's as if God has gone down with the measles.'

Emily now sprang from the side of the bed beseeching the elderly woman, 'Now don't laugh like that, please! Oh, don't.' But she was laughing herself while she still implored, 'I shouldn't say such daft things.'

Mabel Arkwright was holding her hand tightly across her ribs, and her voice came out between gasps as she said, 'It's better medicine than he could give me. But you do say the daftest things, girl. Nobody looking at you and your lady-like pose would ever couple you up with some of the things you come out with.'

'It all comes from my common breeding.'

'Oh, don't you believe that. Your mother wasn't common. By the account she gave me of your father, he was very like my Oscar . . . Emily?'

'Yes, my dear?'

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'Why is it things like this happen to one? I've just got the house as I wanted it, always wanted it. It's nothing like Miss May's place, but it's got an air about it, an air of . . . well, I don't know what.'

'Refinement?'

'Yes. Yes.' Mrs Arkwright nodded once in compliance, then repeated, 'Refinement, that's the word. But without the falderals. You said to me once you couldn't stand bobbed mantel borders, buffaloes' horns on walls, or occasional tables on which you couldn't lay a pin down flat.'

'I said that?'

'Oh yes, years ago. Your mother took an order to one of those big houses in The Strand. The family were away. It must have been just for the day, but the housemaid proudly showed your mother round. And you must have seen the horns decorating the hall and she must have taken you into a drawing-room, because when you came back that's what you said.'

'I can't even remember that occasion.'

'Well, even before you started work with me at fourteen she used to bring you along now and then. But anyway, I thought of what you said, so I've knocked the bobbles off the mantel border, left enough space on the table for a few pins, and, as much as I would have loved to decorate the hall and the whole house with bulls' antlers, I've resisted.'

They were laughing together again now but gently. Then Mrs Arkwright's hand went out towards Emily, and when she took it and leaned slightly forward, the other hand came on to her head and brought her face down and she kissed her. Then, in a thick voice and striving to strike a humorous note, she said, 'That's never been done before, has it? And I don't know whether it will ever be done again. But you should never leave things too long, nor hold back what you want to say, because one never knows the hour, or the day, when it will be impossible to come out with anything. So I'll say it now. Lass, since

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you changed your life some months ago and came to live with me, I've known more comfort and peace than at any time since I lost my Oscar, and you've really become the daughter I never had. And you'll never know what it means to me, the fact that whether my days are going to be cut short or left to be long, you'll be with me.'

Emily found it impossible to speak, so she pressed her lips against the thin sallow cheek, then hurried from the bed. But as she reached the door Mrs Arkwright's voice, returning to its old tartness as if it had never touched on softness or emotion, said, 'But I'm only sixty-two, mind, and you could have your hands full for the next ten or fifteen years. And don't forget there's an old girl and an old gent at the top of the street who are pushed in basket-chairs around the park every day, rain or snow. They tell me they're in their eighties. So you've got a job ahead of you.'

Emily turned about and in the same vein she said, 'Oh no, I won't have any such job ahead of me, for I'll engage at least two day and two night nurses to see to you while I go gallivanting like any young divorced lady looking for a husband. Now, lie there, Mrs Mabel Arkwright, and dwell on that.'

They stared at each other across the room and their chuckling joined. But after Emily had closed the door and had crossed the landing to her own room, she stood for a moment thinking: ten . . . fifteen years. It could be; these things did happen. And she looked ahead and saw her life spent between hats and Mrs Arkwright meandering into senility.

Doctor Montane called the following day and pronounced that his patient's heart was settling into place, and yes, she would be able to walk quietly downstairs and into her new room. But there she must rest in bed for at least a week.

As he was walking away from the bed Mrs Arkwright said, 'Would you care for a cup, doctor?'

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'Coffee?' He turned and looked at her; then his face breaking into what might have been a semblance of a smile, he said, 'Yes. Yes, I would indeed. Thank you very much; it's chilly out.'

'Would you like it laced, then?'

'Laced?' His eyebrows had moved slowly up and his full lips had gone into a pout, and he made the slightest movement with his head as he said, 'Laced? Oh, thank you very much, but not at this time of the morning. If you would care to invite me any time after seven o'clock at night, I'd be delighted to accept a laced coffee, perhaps two. Who knows where to stop once you lace coffee?'

He was actually smiling now, and when he turned to Emily, who was holding the bedroom door ajar for him and enquired of her, 'Do you like laced coffee?' she answered, 'Yes, now and again.'

'Well, well! who would have thought it? The things that go on,' he said and turned his still laughing face towards the bed and Mrs Arkwright; then with a flap of his hand as though to emphasise, yes, who would believe it? he went out and downstairs, accompanied by Emily. And there she said, 'If you will come into the drawing-room I'll see that one of the girls supplies you with an unlaced coffee.'

'By! you're a starchy piece, aren't you?'

'*What?*'

'You heard what I said: you're a starchy piece. Yet you have your coffee laced. One lives and learns in this business.'

'Well, I hope you live a long time, doctor, because you've got a lot to learn. One thing I would advise you start on right away, and that's tact.'

'Oh my. Oh my.' He walked away from her, up the room, looking about him and remarking to no-one in particular, 'Bit different from when the old admiral had it. Woman's taste definitely, and yet very few furbelows. Could be a male touch, what do you say?'

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He turned and was slightly surprised when he found he was addressing an empty room.

Down in the basement kitchen, Emily said to the cook, 'Mary, will you make a cup of coffee, strong, black, and ask Alice to take it up to the drawing-room for Doctor Montane?'

'Oh! Doctor Montane. Is he come, miss?'

'Yes, Doctor Montane has come, and everybody knows it.'

'You don't like him, miss?'

'No, I don't like him, Mary.'

'Funny that, miss, 'cos he's got a good name. Well, so I'm told. Four bob to those who pay, two to those who find it a bit difficult, and nowt to some folk.'

'Oh, he should have a medal pinned on him for that. But you should believe only half of what you hear, Mary, so I'd cut the last two out.'

Mary gave a deep-throated chuckle as she said, 'I'll make it black, miss, just as you say. But I'll have to stick a jug of cream on the side, you know. Anyway, how's the missus?'

'Oh, she's doing fine, Mary. We'll have her downstairs today.'

'Oh, that'll be a blessin', for what with the basement steps an' goin' up the main staircase, Alice's legs were dropping off her last night. Not that the exercise isn't good for her, but enough's as good as a feast. And I wanted to have a word with you, miss. You know, we should have another help; I mean, I'm no softie on Alice, as everybody knows, but now that she's still got to see to next door she's skittering around like a scalded cat from six in the mornin' 'til nine at night.'

'Yes, I know, Mary. I've thought about that for some time, and I'll have a talk with Mrs Arkwright.'

'Thanks, miss, you do that, and we'll be grateful, 'cos madam's never been one for over-staffing, has she?'

They looked at each other. It was a knowing look and required no answer. So Emily went out of the kitchen

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and up the ten half-circle stone steps and into the hall, thinking as she walked that Mary was right, Mrs Arkwright had never been one for over-staffing. Very odd, that. She was so generous in other ways, that is with regard to wages, for she was always a halfpenny an hour up on other hat establishments. But, of course, she expected expert work done for it. Her mother, as a girl, had started on a penny an hour. But a twelve-hour day could bring in six shillings a week, and in those days that was not to be sniffed at. Then she went up to three-halfpence and then tuppence. She was on tuppence an hour when she died. She herself got nothing for the first year, because she was what was called apprenticed. But of course she got her bowl of soup in the half-hour dinner break, and it was always good strong stuff. She was on tuppence an hour when she married; it had risen to threepence an hour by the time she was divorced; now she was no longer on a weekly wage but on what Mrs Arkwright termed a salary: fifty pounds a year and, you could say, board and lodging thrown in; and what was more, free hats and outdoor apparel. She was fortunate . . . oh, yes, she was fortunate . . . In a way she was very fortunate.

She was about to mount the stairs when she thought, I'd better go and tell him his coffee will be brought to him in a moment or so.

When she opened the drawing-room door she found him peering into a china cabinet. He did not turn fully around to her, but over his shoulder he called, 'Some of these pieces are Dresden, aren't they? And that's a complete tea-set of Spode, isn't it?'

'Yes, so I'm told.'

He had turned from the cabinet now, saying, 'So you are told? You know nothing about china, then, just what you're told?'

'No-one knows anything about anything except what they are told. Right from the beginning one is told.' She stressed the 'told'. 'A child is told what to say, what to do. Isn't that so?'

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'Yes: yes, you're right there; but some children are more clever than others; they not only maintain what they are told, they take it up and work at it. For instance, if I'd just been told that was a full set of Spode, I would have wanted to know where it was made, and who made it. *We're not just told things*, we've got to extend on what we are *told*.'

'Yes. Yes, you're right. And, of course, you'd be one of those people who would definitely extend on what they were told.'

'You've got a bee in your bonnet, haven't you?'

'What?'

'Oh, you say "*what*", and not "*pardon*". Young ladies say "pardon", ordinary people say "what", and I can't imagine you being ordinary . . . Mind out of the way!' He thrust an arm out in her direction. 'You're going to be pushed in the back with that tray.'

She had not heard Alice's approach and she stepped quickly to the side, while keeping her gaze on the obnoxious individual.

Alice passed her now, smiling widely, and walked up the room and put the tray on the edge of the table, pushed a few knick-knacks to one side; then, looking at the doctor, she said, 'Cook put a couple of scones on there, doctor. They're fresh out of the oven. She said you might like 'em.'

'Oh, you thank the cook very kindly for me. She's a very thoughtful woman. Tell her I haven't had any breakfast yet because I've just come from bringing another fortunate human being into the world. The mother, being a sensible woman, had decided she wasn't going to let it be born at all if she had her way. You tell the cook that.'

'I will, doctor, I will.'

As Alice went out laughing, the young man laughed with her; but Emily's cream-tinted skin was showing an almost rosy glow: she knew that this distasteful individual was out to shock her. By mentioning a baby's birth he imagined that he was infringing on the sensitive feelings

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of a maiden lady. In her opinion this man should never have been a doctor: at least, he should not yet have been practising, for he had no idea how to handle people. He was uncouth, and being so, his nature was, as it were, up in arms against what he imagined to be a prudish streak in her. There was something else about the man that made her angry.

She knew her face was flushed and this annoyed her further; and so, trying to keep her annoyance from her voice, she said as quietly as she could, 'Well, if your patient was so long in labour that you apparently had to spend some part of the night with her, would it not have been advisable to send her to a hospital where she could have had specialist treatment and perhaps a breech-birth?'

For a moment she felt a spurt of elation filling her: his eyebrows had gone up again, his mouth had gone into a slight gape; but then he said, 'Well! well! human after all. And you read the papers, don't you? the parts not fit for young ladies' eyes. You have just given a brief description of N. Bates, and the case of the family bringing a case against the doctor for not doing his job. Well! well! we live and learn. I knew young ladies did read such things on the quiet, but to express them, never!'

'I'm not one of your young ladies, doctor, I am a working woman. And whatever you have against middle-class young ladies, you've come to the wrong shop to vent your spleen, and I emphasise that, the wrong shop. I, sir, was married when I was seventeen. I've been divorced for some time now. I began working when I was fourteen . . . unpaid for a year, apart from a bowl of soup. Years before that, of course, I would have been carried by my mother into a freezing attic, where she and many others sewed until blood ran out of their finger ends, with their babies lying in wash-baskets beside them. When children became old enough they were put to work untangling wool or the knots out of string. I have worked every day of my life, and among very ordinary people. I have also,

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through the business, met and talked with the middle class, and I have yet to meet anyone whom I would take for the person you imagine me to be.'

There was silence between them and the whole room seemed to be still. Then, in a very calm voice now, she said, 'I would drink your coffee, doctor, before it gets cold.'

He took a step away from the cabinet as he said, 'And you hope it chokes me, don't you?'

'Yes, something like that.' And having said this, she turned away and left the room.

The door closed behind her and she stood for a moment, head to one side, her chin up, as she listened to his unusually deep and bellowing laugh. It was like something that could have been emitted by a very large man. But he wasn't large, he wasn't even tall, he was slim and of medium height. And a more aggravating person she hoped never to meet.

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3

It was Easter of 1879 and the transfer to the downstairs bedroom was suiting Mrs Arkwright very well: she could walk through the door into the hall; she could see to the work-rooms on the ground floor where Amity Lockhart, Margie Monkton and Jean Felton were working away, piling feathers and flowers and ribbons on to all shapes and sizes of blocked crowns, some tall, some round and some even square, at least on the outside, the inner shape being rounded to fit the head. And there were bonnets by the score, capped with frills and trailing ribbons. A few were entirely in black, to satisfy mourning orders; but in the main, the room presented a gay scene of ribbons, flowers, fruit and feathers.

There were two new apprentices, Molly Stock and Sarah Hubbard, but these divided their time between the hat-room and the alteration-room upstairs, over which Esther McCann and Lena Broadbent now presided . . . And as Mrs Arkwright had been forbidden to climb the stairs in number thirty-four, so she was forbidden in number thirty-five. Therefore she'd had to make a concession of having a room in 'her house' where the girls could bring the models to her for examination and advice as to further improvement, or, in many cases, the deleting of this apron front or that bushel-like back. Also to this room, at frequent intervals, would come the ladies'-maids with whom Mrs Arkwright dealt and had done for many years. At one time she had been in touch with only four, but now she had nine such visiting her, mostly at some evening hour when their mistresses would be dining out or doing a theatre. And she paid them well for the gowns, costumes and lingerie they brought. There were times

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when she might not see certain of them for a full year, but most of her stock was made up after the season of balls and presentations at Court, and the like.

It might be a strange talent, but Mabel Arkwright could detect if an article of top apparel, such as an evening gown, or a dress, or a suit, had been worn more than a few times. She had been known to pick up a dress and with a lift of her nostrils would say, 'Not more than three times.' And an evening dress would cause her nostrils to sniff before she pronounced, 'Once.'

She was of the opinion that no matter how often a woman bathed or scented her body, she had an odour that penetrated her clothing, and the more she wore a garment the more of that odour it absorbed. Occasionally, she would briefly handle a dress, then say, 'Tear that up; don't use any part of it; and in future we'll cut that supply out.'

Now, with the new arrangements, it was Emily who saw to the ladies who would ostensibly come to look at hats, but who would discreetly wonder if Mrs Arkwright had anything that might interest them in the dress line. And Emily would say, 'Oh yes, madam, I think she has,' and then would lead the client to a room that was allotted for such visits.

However, such business would never have thrived had she ushered more than one into that room at any time. In consequence, there were no cubicles, only a chair, two wardrobes and a large swinging cheval-mirror.

Outside the workroom, there were few opportunities for laughter; or other occurrences which might sow the seeds for laughter and which would be allowed to bubble over and be enjoyed later. One such had occurred yesterday. A new customer had come to view hats. She was accompanied by a gentleman. And Molly Stock's description of her was very accurate: empty-headed; eighteen at the most; very pretty and very common. As for the gentleman, he was very middle-aged and apparently very rich. The girl had a wedding ring on

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her finger, but if they were married, said Molly Stock, then she herself had just swum from Borneo and her hair was still wet.

After the couple had left with the coachman, who had been brought in to carry out five bandboxes, apparently Molly and Sarah had laughed until they cried.

What did Mrs Arkwright think about it? Well, what Mabel said to Emily was, 'They bought five hats, and as long as she stays with him they'll come back again. Being a man of the world, he brought her here likely because it's a bit off the beaten track; he couldn't very well take her into Finlays or anywhere along Bond Street, for he would likely run into the wife of one of his best friends, or even his own.' And she had added musingly, 'Five hats in one go. Where's she going to wear them?'

When, with a little smile on her lips, Emily said, 'Perhaps in bed,' they, too, laughed until they cried; and when Emily added, 'They won't be much use afterwards,' their laughter increased.

Life was pleasant. Life was good.

And then the following day they were given another laugh; at least, the incident started with a laugh; but it caused Emily, reluctantly, to change her opinion, be it so slightly, of a certain person.

Doctor Montane had got into the habit of dropping in once a week to keep an eye on Mrs Arkwright, and on this occasion he brought with him not only his doctor's black bag, but also a round box covered with brown paper.

After examining Mrs Arkwright, he looked at her hard for a moment before asking, 'Have you been doing what you shouldn't do?'

'I don't know what I shouldn't do, except go up and down stairs.'

'Well, that's what you've been doing, isn't it?'

'No, it isn't. There's no need.'

'Been outside walking?'

'No, I haven't been outside walking, either. I haven't been out since last Sunday, when I went for a drive.

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We hired a carriage and Emily and I did things in style: through the park we went and down The Mall.'

'*Oh! Oh!* Looking for husbands?'

'Don't be cheeky, young man. Let me tell you, Emily has no need to go looking for a husband, they're on the doorstep.'

He didn't speak for a moment; but then he said, 'Yes, I can see that.'

'You married?'

'No, I am not married.'

'Going to be married?'

'Well.' He now looked up towards the ceiling as if thinking, then said quickly, 'Not that I'm aware of, but I hope. Yes, I do hope, some day.'

'Anyway, why do you ask about the stairs?'

'Well, it's evident, isn't it? You've been overdoing it again in some way, and if it isn't that, it's your diet. Do you eat a lot of fat?'

'I like fat. What is meat without fat? Tasteless.'

'May I ask what you drink in the way of wine?'

'No, you may not, young sir. But nevertheless I will tell you. I like my drop of port and I also like my nip of whisky, and I'm too old to change now. So let this do its worst.' She now flapped her hand against her chest; and he answered with an air of indifference, 'Well, yes, it's yours to do what you like with. Who am I to stop you? The only thing is, I don't want to lose a patient. I'm speaking purely from personal reasons: I need the money.'

Mrs Arkwright now bit on her lip while her eyes twinkled and she said, 'You'll go too far, young man. But in the meantime let us go into the drawing-room, where the coffee will be waiting, minus nips.'

'Oh, what a pity!' he said as he stooped to pick up his medical bag and the other brown-papered box that was tied with string.

As they entered the drawing-room Emily was about to leave; but he stopped her by saying, 'Ah, Mrs Ratcliffe,

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the very person. I would like your advice on something. Have you a minute to spare?'

Emily cast a glance at Mrs Arkwright before saying, 'Only one or two. But I'm rather curious as to why you should want advice from me.'

'Oh, on your own subject, Mrs Ratcliffe; hats, of course. I could have asked Mrs Arkwright here, but two heads are always better than one, I'm told.'

'Hats? You want advice on hats, ladies' hats?'

'What else but ladies' hats? When *I* want a hat I go to my hatter.'

Emily inclined her head as she said, 'Yes. Yes, of course.' Then the three of them walked up the room, and he, having placed the bag on a table, proceeded to take off the wrapping from the papered box. Having done so, he lifted the lid and extracted from the box a bonnet, a very, very worn bonnet, an old-fashioned bonnet, and holding it in his hand, he looked from one to another, saying, 'I brought it for size, but I want something much more modern and, I'm told, apparently on good authority, although I don't know what you ladies think about it, that hats are getting smaller and not so heavily trimmed.'

'You are wrong there, sir,' Mrs Arkwright put in sharply. 'There are hats for every occasion: the races, the regattas and such like require large hats, especially if they are expecting sunshine. But not only that, there is a vying, a competition for the largest and the best-trimmed hats on such an occasion. Then there is the country-hat occasion, generally not so large. For city wear, I admit, and with those people or ladies who have to attend to business of one sort or another, the hat remains small. And, of course, the bonnet is small by nature.'

'Oh, yes. Yes, I see.' He nodded at her. 'I have been misinformed, I can see that. But my aunt . . . and family live in the country, you know.'

It was Emily who now said in a tone that implied simple enquiry: 'You need a bonnet for your aunt?'

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He turned on her sharply, saying, 'Yes! Mrs Ratcliffe, for my aunt. As I have yet no wife and no fiancée, and definitely as yet I cannot afford a mistress, I can assure you this bonnet is for my aunt.'

Mrs Arkwright's shoulders shook slightly, and when Emily's head went up and her chin was characteristically thrust out, Mrs Arkwright could only remind her: 'Well, you asked for that, Emily. Oh yes, you did.'

'I asked for no such thing, Mrs Arkwright. But I think it unnecessary that I should need an explanation from the doctor that he has neither wife, fiancée, nor' – she now stretched – 'mistress.' She had spoken as if he were not present; but he, taking two steps in order to stand in front of her, said quietly, 'Believe me, I had no intention of embarrassing you.'

'You did not embarrass me. Do you think the mention of the word "mistress" embarrasses me?'

'No. No.' His voice now rose slightly. 'I couldn't imagine anything embarrassing you, to tell you the truth. But I just want to make it plain to you that I sincerely need help in choosing a suitable bonnet for an aunt, who is fifty-nine years old and is termed eccentric. To my mind she is not even peculiar. The eccentricity seems to have its origins in the fact that she has worn that' – he pointed now to the bonnet that was resting on the lid of the box – 'for the last twelve years, both inside and outside the house. Every now and then the surmise arises as to whether or not she goes to bed in it.'

There was a titter now from Mrs Arkwright, and even Emily was unable to suppress a smile. 'You see, if you will let me explain,' he went on, 'she is my father's half-sister and she has always lived in this house in which she was born, as I said, fifty-nine years ago. I was brought up with her. When I was three years old, she seemed old to me, but she has never seemed to change: she remains a dear sweet person. There are nine in the family; I happen to be the youngest.' He now turned and addressed himself to Mrs Arkwright, adding, 'The failure of the family,

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because who but an idiot would go in for doctoring unless he meant to get into Harley Street or to become a great cutter-upper of other human beings? So I am what you would call the black sheep. However, in the eyes of the others I do possess a favourable quality: I can manage Phoebe, at least in most ways, except with regard to her dress. Whether she changes her underwear, I don't know, but I do know it takes almost the combined effort of my three sisters, my mother and two maids to get her top dress off and then to burn it. She often goes to bed in it.'

'You're joking, doctor.'

He shook his head as he looked at Mrs Arkwright, and quite solemnly said, 'I'm not, Mrs Arkwright, not a word am I saying in joke. That is Aunt Phoebe. As for the bonnet, I have seen her in bed with that on, too. And as you will notice' – he tentatively picked up the black ribbon attached to it – 'that could stand up itself with grease, now couldn't it? because she wipes her fingers on it. It hangs down the back. But don't let me give you the impression that she is mad, or anything in that line; she is not. She will discuss any topic of the day: she has studied history more deeply than is usually done in schools, and she can also play the piano, by ear.' Now he was chuckling, as was Mrs Arkwright, and even Emily was laughing. 'But unfortunately she is the reason for many disputes in the house, especially with Father. When he is away from court he likes a little peace at the weekends. But does he get it? Not when Phoebe wishes to argue a case he's been on. Yes, that's true.'

'Your father is Sir Arthur Montane! the big judge?'

'He is Sir Arthur Montane, the judge, Mrs Arkwright. He is not the big judge, he is really a very small man. But then, of course, it can be said he has a very big head with a lot of brains inside and a greater amount of common sense.'

'Well! well! And he *is* a "Sir", you say?'

'Yes. Yes, he is a "Sir".'

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'Well! well! So you are the son of Sir Arthur Montane.'

'Unfortunately, yes. I say unfortunately, not because I am my father's son but because, he being a judge and a "Sir", people expect so much more from me. I think I'm a great disappointment.'

'Don't be silly.' And Mrs Arkwright flapped a hand at him. 'Are you fishing for compliments? Well, you're not getting them from me. Although I will say this: you're a very good doctor, and I'm not the only one who says so; I hear of it from my women in there' – she pointed in the direction of the next house – 'and who would vote for you to get into Parliament tomorrow, that is if women had the vote, of course. They know about you, that you attend to those further down the river, while old Smeaton sees to the moneyed lot. It's a wonder you got the chance to come here.'

For a moment he did not answer, and when he did he said quietly, 'You're well informed, Mrs Arkwright. But let me tell you, and in saying what I'm going to say I'm not besmirching the middle class, in which, of course, my people reside, or those lower down the social scale who have money enough to pay, my sympathies are with those who can't pay at all. And, you' – he pointed towards Emily – 'don't come back and say that I'm making myself out to be the defender of the poor.'

'I wasn't going to say any such thing.'

'No, but you were thinking it. I know you. Oh, by now I know you, Mrs Ratcliffe. But I'll say this to you while I'm on, that I am not alone, there are a number like me who do give of their time and would gladly give up more if they possibly could, to go out and help what is usually termed the scum of the earth. Have you ever been down Pink Lane, that leads to Baker's Wharf, or to Catherine Street? Oh no, you'd never have been along there. Well, even out of curiosity, I'd advise you not to attempt it even in the daylight, unless you have a good escort. Oh, perhaps you wouldn't be knocked about, but

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any money or valuables you might have on you when entering that quarter, or the countless courts and alleys thereabouts, would be missing when you came out, which would ensure that somebody that night would eat better than they'd done for some days.'

'You should be in Parliament.'

'Yes, I know I should. And as our good friend here, Mrs Arkwright, suggested, if it were left to the women, I would be; and I wish it were left to the women. Oh yes, I do.'

'You'll never be rich.'

He turned back to Mrs Arkwright, saying, 'You never know. You just never know. I won't be rich at this game, no, but I have my plans. I'm going to marry a rich woman; well, a woman with enough money to keep me in good cigars, good port – like you, I like a glass of port – a holiday on the continent when I'm feeling tired; and with the rest of her money I'll take hordes of youngsters into the country or to the seaside, and filling empty bellies; and in the meantime, seeing that pregnant women have decent attention, and, too, that my father jails other women who take the lives of young girls by back-street abortions.'

They were standing now as if in a triangle, and their eyes moved from one to the other, portraying their different thoughts but not voicing them, until he suddenly said, 'Well, what about this bonnet? I promised the family I'd bring a new bonnet back for her because there she is, they tell me, sitting up in her room. Apparently, Josephine wrenched it from her and she brought it in this morning, and I have to catch a train back tonight so that the family will be able to sleep in their beds.'

'I can't believe this. It's one of the funniest things I've heard in years. But look, sit yourself down there for a moment. I'll ring for the coffee, and in the meantime we'll go and choose a bonnet for Miss Phoebe. Come on, Emily.'

Emily did not move straightaway, but remained staring at the young man, this surprising young man, this

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exasperating, annoying . . . but very human young man.

But of a sudden, as if coming to herself, she swung round and followed Mrs Arkwright from the room. And when they were about to pass through the bedroom and into the workshop that they now called number thirty-five, Mrs Arkwright stopped Emily by taking her by the arm, and, looking into her face, she said, 'He's one in a million, and he more than likes you. You want to think about it.'

'*What!*' Emily pulled herself away from the hand on her arm. 'You're joking. *Him?* I . . . I really can't stand him. Oh, and all that talk . . .'

'That wasn't just talk, those were facts, and he meant every word of what he said. I know men. You'll be a fool if you don't jump at the chance.'

'*Don't be silly, Mabel.* He's looking for a rich woman, you heard what he said, a rich woman to carry out his ideas. He doesn't want a wife, he really wants a bank account.'

'*Don't you be silly, girl.* The last was just a cover-up. But anyway, who's to say you won't be rich one day?' They stared at each other for a moment before Emily cried, 'Oh, please, please! don't hold that out as any carrot. I want nothing more from you than what you've already given me. You've given me everything. Oh, please, leave what you have to whom you like; I've got a pair of hands on me, I could start up a business anywhere. I . . . well, if we are speaking plainly, I'd likely be glad to carry on like I do next door, but in a smaller place. Oh no, I beg you, don't hold any carrots out to me. Anyway, I wouldn't accept them. As for him, never! He's the last man in the world I'd marry, and believe me on that.'

'I believe you, the way you feel now, but time will tell. Come on now, let's choose a bonnet for Phoebe. I'll be dying to hear the next episode on Phoebe. I've never heard anything so funny for years . . . And to think his father is Sir Arthur Montane, the judge! But

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it's odd, isn't it? because he himself seems so ordinary, even though he's a doctor. What I mean is, he doesn't appear as if he's come from that class. He said himself he's the black sheep, but what he meant, I think, was a rebel. That type of family always seems to have one. There was a family living near Miss May when I was there. They had a son like him: he joined the Army as a private and his people got him hauled out and sent him to a big Military School, but he did a bunk from there and went to sea. He became quite a hero to the villagers.'

They had crossed the hall and were about to enter the workshop when Mrs Arkwright stopped and, appealingly now, she said, 'Try to think differently about him, lass. You know something? It would ease my mind if I thought you were going to be settled for life with a man like that.'

'And who, may I ask, would look after you and this business?'

'Oh, he'd come and live here.'

Emily closed her eyes, and drew in a deep breath before saying, 'I'd like that and I'd be quids in pocket every week from his non-paying patients. Just think of that now, just think of that.'

And Mrs Arkwright's mind immediately adjusted to this line of thinking, and she leaned closer to Emily and softly said, 'And think of marrying into a titled family. Think of having a judge for a father-in-law. Think of that now,' to which Emily answered in an equally quiet voice, 'And you know what I think, Mrs Arkwright? I think you're going up the pole, and the sooner you reach the top and are put into a strait-jacket the better I'll be pleased. Now we'll go and choose the bonnet, shall we?'

As they entered the showroom it was to see Mrs Glenda Brompton trying on a blue leghorn hat heavily trimmed with pale blue ribbon, and she greeted them loudly, saying, 'Ah, Mrs Arkwright, how nice to see you. Are you feeling better? You don't appear much these days; but then things run smoothly and always will under Mrs

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Ratcliffe's orderly hand. Do you like this? Do you think it suits me? They tell me that large hats are going out. I saw it in the *West End Gazette* and they are nearly always right, you know. Also they say curves are slightly vulgar now, that the figure is to be flatter. But as I said to Lady Knowle' – she nodded from one to the other – 'what will our dear Queen do, eh?' The 'eh' seemed to come from well back in her throat; and she said again, 'Eh? Poor dear, she's stuck with her front. Yet if she says busts are immodest, then they are immodest. But how to get rid of them and to become flat, shapeless? You, Mrs Ratcliffe, you'll have no trouble. Your figure is very much . . . well, in the coming fashion, so says the *West End Gazette*.'

'I think the *West End Gazette* was only referring to city day dress, Mrs Brompton. Yet the slim fashion has been in vogue in Paris and Brussels for some time now and they prophesy that the three-tier skirt will be returning next year. It went out in the seventies, you know. The fashion there for hats, too, is tending towards the small and high, at least for ladies who drive in open carriages.'

She pointed now to a hat-stand where a concoction of tiny flowers and feathers was perched on a small straw hat, partly shaped as a bonnet with ribbons hanging from each side. 'The ribbons are for tying under the chin, you understand.' She now looked at Mrs Arkwright, saying, 'We saw one such, didn't we, Mrs Arkwright, when we drove in The Mall last Sunday?'

'Really?' The big lady was slightly nonplussed. She was not tactless enough to say, 'You drive in The Mall?' but her expression spoke for her, and Emily answered it by saying, 'We're so busy during the week, it's the only time we can use the carriage.'

'Would you please excuse us, Mrs Brompton? We must go to the workroom. We've been asked to design a bonnet for Sir Arthur Montane's sister Phoebe. She's a friend of ours, you know . . . I do hope Miss Stock will find something suitable for you. That model, if I may suggest, is a little too flamboyant; try something a little

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less ornate. See that Mrs Brompton is satisfied, will you, Miss Stock?'

'Yes, Mrs Ratcliffe. Yes.'

As they passed through the door into the workroom the hands of the three girls became still and their mouths were slightly agape as they listened to their mistress saying to Mrs Ratcliffe, 'You're a bitch.'

'Yes. Yes, I know I am. And it was a delightful experience.'

'We'll lose her.'

'Well, for my part I couldn't be more pleased. I cannot stand the woman.'

'That's the second one today you cannot stand. It isn't the way to do business, or keep it.'

'I've no intention of ever doing business with your first illusion, Mrs Arkwright. As for the second one back there, it irks me that any one of us has to do business with her type.'

'Business means dealing with all types, girl.'

'You're a hypocrite, Mrs Arkwright. You've been wanting to have a go at that woman for years.'

'Yes, I might have, but I knew I had to earn a crust.'

'Poor soul, poor soul. I'm sorry for you. Well, now you're past the crust-earning, you're on the bread and jam, and that being so I should have thought you could afford to stick to your principles.'

'You know something, Emily Ratcliffe? I take back my first suggestion; he's much too good for you and I wouldn't wish him on to you.' Then swinging round, she looked at the three gaping girls and said, 'And you close your mouths and your ears, too. You've heard nothing. But bring out what bonnets you have; I want one for a woman of fifty-nine named Phoebe.'

Amity, Margie and Jean were all looking slightly bewildered; but then they began to scatter around the room, pulling out deep drawers at the bottom of cupboards, and putting finished and half-finished bonnets in a row on the long polished table. But they

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even stopped doing this when they heard the strange sound, and simultaneously they looked towards Mrs Ratcliffe, who had dropped into a chair and, with her arms folded, was hugging herself tightly and laughing in such a way as to sound almost hysterical; only to be further surprised when Mrs Arkwright, too, hugged herself tightly and also dropped into a chair and started to laugh. And such was the infectious sound, the girls joined in, with giggles at first, then hiccuping into loud gusts of laughter which must have penetrated to the select apartments above, for the far door burst open and Lena Broadbent and Esther McCann rushed in, only to stop immediately and to stand aghast for a moment, before they too began to chuckle, calling, 'What's . . . what's it all about? What's the joke?'

It was Jean Felton, pointing a trembling hand first to Mrs Arkwright and then to Emily, who spluttered, 'They seem to have had a row over . . . over a bonnet for somebody named Phoebe.'

'A row over a bonnet for somebody named Phoebe?'

This statement seemed to increase both Mrs Arkwright's laughter and that of Emily, until suddenly Mrs Arkwright stopped laughing and, her head going back and her mouth opening wide, she muttered, 'Emily! Emily!'

Emily's quick reaction in jumping up and crying, 'Oh, my God!' immediately silenced the others. Then addressing no-one in particular, she cried, 'Doctor Montane is in the drawing-room. Fetch him! Quick!' . . .

He came in at a run, felt her pulse, put his hand on her heart, but did not speak to her. Then looking up at Emily, he said, 'Anything in the way of a stretcher, flat board, anything like that?'

'No . . . hos . . . hospital,' whispered Mrs Arkwright.

He looked down at the pallid face and said, 'All right: no hospital; but don't move.'

Emily looked in bewilderment from one to the other of the five women, and they, one after the other, shook

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their heads. Then Esther said, 'The ironing boards . . . but they're only about three to four feet long.'

He was again holding Mrs Arkwright's wrist and once more he addressed Emily: 'A light basket chair, then?'

'Yes. Yes.' She nodded at him; then turning towards the girls, she said, 'In my bedroom, there's two. Bring the one with the high back.'

Amity and Molly Stock had now come in from the showroom and it was they who turned and ran to do Emily's bidding.

The doctor now bent over Mrs Arkwright, as she attempted to say something: 'Don't talk,' he said.

'Die . . . laughing . . . good . . . good w . . .'

'You're not going to die. Don't talk.'

The girls returned at the run, carrying a basket chair between them, and when they placed it to his side, he looked at it dubiously, then back to the patient, as he exclaimed, 'I could carry her, although I don't think I would last the distance; but that chair's going to be as heavy as she is. Look,' he bent towards Emily, 'if I were to pick her up, could you and one of the others support her legs?'

'Yes. Oh yes, of course.'

'I'm going to lift you up, Mrs Arkwright. Now just try to let go, relax. You'll soon be in bed. Now, here I come. I'm putting my arms around you. Just lie back on them.'

So saying, he lifted her bodily from the chair and Emily and Esther McCann placed their arms under her legs, and thus, crab-wise, they went as quickly as they could from the workroom, past the gaping Mrs Brompton, across the hall and into the panelled bedroom.

Having laid her on the bed, they stood panting for a moment, until Emily said, 'Shall we undress her?' And to this he replied, 'No. Not for a while anyway. Let her rest.' Then addressing Esther, he muttered, 'Would you mind bringing my medical bag from the drawing-room, please?'

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They were standing side by side near the bed head, when he asked in a low voice, 'What brought this on, d'you know?'

'Yes.' Emily's voice too was hardly above a whisper. 'Laughter mostly, but preceded by an argument; or rather a heated discussion.'

'Between you and her?'

'Yes.'

'I can't imagine that, not a serious argument.'

'I had been rude to a customer, purposely rude. She's an objectionable woman. We passed her in the hall. Her opinion, I mean Mrs Arkwright's, was the same as mine, but she had more sense and had kept it to herself.'

'And that's what caused you to argue?'

'Not entirely. There was another reason.'

'To do with your opinion of me?'

'*What?*' The question was sharp yet still in the continued whisper.

'Well, you didn't believe a word I said . . .'

He got no further, for the door opened and Esther came in with his bag, and he immediately went to meet her, then took it from her, saying, 'Thanks,' and quickly opened it. From a small bottle he took out two pills, then he poured out a glass of water from a carafe at the bedside table. Bending over Mrs Arkwright, he spoke to her as if she were awake, which she seemingly was, for when he said, 'I want you to swallow these two pills, they'll make you feel better,' she repeated what she had said before: 'No . . . hos . . . pital.'

'No, no; you're not going to hospital. Anyway, no matter what I might want to do with you, your defender here would balk me. Now, that's it; that's a good girl. Now you'll feel better.'

Then swiftly turning to Emily, he said, 'We'll get her clothes off.'

'Oh; Esther will help me.'

'Just as you wish. Just as you wish.' He stepped back, went to his bag again and, taking out a piece of paper,

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wrote on it and together with a bottle of white tablets he placed it on the bedside table; then left the room and made his way to the drawing-room, picked up the old bonnet from the table, put it back in the box and re-wrapped it in the brown paper, which he tied in place with the string; so that by the time he returned to the bedroom carrying the box, Emily and Esther had finished the task of undressing Mrs Arkwright and getting her into a clean gown. He lifted up her hand and felt her pulse; then turning towards Emily, he said, 'It's steadier. She'll sleep for a while. May I have a word with you?'

At this, Esther, looking at Emily, said, 'I'll get back, then. Just call me if you need me.'

'I will, Esther. Thanks'; and as she went out of one door, so he walked to the opposite door and into the hall; and Emily, after glancing towards the bed, followed him.

'Will she be all right?'

'Yes and no,' he answered. 'It all depends on herself. Earlier on I thought she had been over-exercising, but then she tells me that she indulges herself with fat, and she seems to enjoy her port and whisky. So, if she were to cut out these, the answer to part of your question could be, yes, she'll be all right, at least for a while. But if she doesn't, I wouldn't be accountable for how long it'll be before the next attack, which could be the last one.'

Emily let out a long slow breath before she said, 'Then the attack couldn't just be the result of the argument or the hysterical laughter?'

'No; you can wipe both suspects off your conscience. But apart from me coming into the argument, what, may I enquire, caused the hysterical laughter?'

Emily looked away for a moment, then said, 'It doesn't seem to be much of a laughing matter now; but at the time it sounded hilarious. It was about your aunt's bonnet and the name Phoebe coupled with it, I think, and . . . and I suppose its coming so quickly on our hot words. And the girls didn't

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