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PART I

'The Straw Sailor'



This dainty straw hat with a ribbon bow is the essence of charming simplicity. Becoming to every face shape, it is a practical everyday choice for the young working lady . . .

CHAPTER ONE

Sophie hung on tightly to the leather strap as the omnibus rattled forwards. Another Monday morning and, all about her, London was whirring into life: damp and steamy with last night's rain and this morning's smoke. As she stood wedged between a couple of clerks wearing bowler hats and carrying newspapers, she gazed out of the window at the grey street, wondering whether that faint fragrance of spring she'd caught on the wind had been just her imagination. She found herself thinking about the garden of Orchard House: the daffodils that must be blooming there now, the damp earth and the smell of rain in the grass.

'Piccadilly Circus!' yelled the conductor as the omnibus clattered to a halt, and Sophie pushed her thoughts away. She straightened her hat, grasped her umbrella in a neatly gloved hand, and slipped between the clerks and past an elderly lady wearing a *pince-nez*, who said 'Dear me!' as if quite scandalised at the sight of a young lady alone, recklessly

jumping on and off omnibuses. Sophie paid no attention and hopped down on to the pavement. There was simply no sense in listening. After all, she wasn't that sort of young lady any more.

As the omnibus drew away, she turned and gazed for a moment at the enormous white building that towered above her. Sinclair's department store was so new that, as yet, it had not even opened its doors to customers. But already it was the most famous store in London – and therefore, some said, the whole world. With its magnificent columns and ranks of coloured flags, it wasn't like any other shop Sophie had ever seen. It was more like a classical temple that had sprung up, white and immaculate against the smog and dirt of Piccadilly. The huge plate-glass windows were shrouded with royal-blue silk curtains, making it look like the stage in a grand theatre before the performance has begun.

The owner of Sinclair's department store was Mr Edward Sinclair, who was as famous as the store itself. He was an American, a self-made man, renowned for his elegance, for the single, perfect orchid he always wore in his buttonhole, for the ever-changing string of beautiful ladies on his arm and, most of all, for his wealth. Although they had only been working for him for a few weeks, and most of them had barely set eyes on him, the staff of Sinclair's had taken to referring to him as 'the Captain', because rumour had

it that he had run away to sea in his youth. There were already a great number of rumours about Edward Sinclair. But whether the stories were true or not, it seemed an apt nickname. After all, the store itself was a little like a ship: as glittering and luxurious as an ocean liner ready to carry its customers proudly on a journey to an exotic new land.

Somewhere, Sophie could hear a clock chiming. Drawing herself up to her full height – which wasn't very tall – she lifted her chin and set off smartly round the side of the great building, the little heels of her buttoned boots clicking briskly over the cobbles. As she approached, her heart began to thump, and she put up a hand to check that her hat, with its blue-ribbon bow, was still at exactly the right angle, and that her hair was not coming down. She was part of Sinclair's department store now: a small cog in this great machine. As such, she knew she must be nothing short of perfect.

Through the doors was another world. The staff corridors were humming with activity. All about her, people were hurrying along carrying palms in pots, or stepladders and tins of paint, or stacks of the distinctive royal-blue and gold Sinclair's boxes. A smart saleswoman whisked by with an exquisitely beaded evening gown draped carefully over her arm; another hustled along with an armful of parasols, seemingly in a terrific rush; and the strict store manager,

Mr Cooper, could be seen dressing down a salesman about the condition of his gloves. Sophie dived in among them and then slipped into the empty cloakroom to take off her coat and hat.

It still seemed extraordinary that she was here at all. Even a year ago, the thought of earning her own living would never have entered her imagination – and now, here she was, a fully fledged shop girl. She paused for a moment before the cloakroom looking-glass to survey her hair, and pushed a hairpin back into place. Mr Cooper was a stickler for immaculate personal appearances, but worse than that, she knew that Edith and the other girls would be only too quick to notice any shortcomings. Once upon a time she had been rather vain about her looks, carefully brushing her hair one hundred times each night and fussing Miss Pennyfeather to tie her velvet ribbon in exactly the right sort of bow, but now she only wanted to look neat and businesslike. She didn't feel in the least like the girl she had been back then. Her face in the looking glass was familiar, but strange: she looked older somehow, pale and tired and out of sorts.

Her shoulders slumped as she thought of the long week that lay ahead of her, but at once she frowned at herself sharply. Papa would have said that she ought to be thinking about how fortunate she was to be here. There were plenty of others who weren't so lucky, she reminded herself. She had

seen them: girls her own age or even younger, selling apples or little posies of flowers on street corners; girls begging for pennies from passing gentlemen; girls huddled in doorways, wearing clothes that were scarcely more than rags.

Thinking this, she shook her head, squared her shoulders and forced herself to smile. 'Buck up,' she told her reflection sternly. Whatever else happened today, she was determined that she wouldn't give Edith any more excuses to call her stuck-up.

She strode purposefully towards the door, but before she had taken more than a couple of steps, she tripped and fell forwards.

'Oh!' exclaimed a voice. As she righted herself, she glanced down to see a boy gazing up at her in alarm. He was sitting on the floor, partly hidden behind a row of coats, and she had fallen over his boots. 'Are you all right?'

'What are you *doing* down there?' demanded Sophie breathlessly, more embarrassed to have been caught pulling faces and talking to herself than actually hurt. No doubt this boy would make fun of her now, like all the rest, and he'd soon be telling all the others what he had overheard. 'You shouldn't hide in corners spying!' she burst out.

'I wasn't spying,' said the boy, scrambling to his feet. He was wearing the Sinclair's porters' uniform – trim dark-blue trousers, a matching jacket with a double row of brass

buttons and a peaked hat – but the jacket looked too big for him, the trousers a bit short, and the hat was askew on his untidy, straw-coloured hair. 'I was *reading*.' For proof, he held out a crumpled story-paper, entitled *Boys of Empire*, in one grubby hand.

But before Sophie could say anything else, the door slammed open, and a cluster of shop girls pushed their way into the room, in a flurry of skirts and ribbons.

'Excuse us! Beg your pardon!'

A pretty dark-haired girl caught sight of the boy and smirked. 'Haven't you fetched that tin of elbow grease for Jim yet?' she demanded, sending a ripple of titters through the group.

'Learned to tie your bootlaces all by yourself, have you?' another girl giggled.

A third took in Sophie, and made a ridiculous curtsy in her direction. 'Forgive us, Your Ladyship. We didn't see that you were gracing us with your presence.'

'Aren't you going to introduce us to your young man?' added the dark-haired girl in an arch tone, making the others laugh even more.

The boy's cheeks flushed crimson, but Sophie tried her hardest to look indifferent. She had heard this kind of thing many times already during the two weeks of training that all the Sinclair's shop girls had undertaken. She had realised

that she had started all wrong on the very first morning, arriving wearing one of her best dresses – black silk and velvet with jet buttons. She had thought she ought to be smart and make a good first impression, but when she arrived, she realised that every other girl in the room was dressed almost identically, in a plain dark skirt, and a neat white blouse. The rustle and swish of her skirts had made them all look at her, and then begin giggling behind their hands.

'Who does she think she is? The Lady of the Manor?' the dark-haired girl, Edith, had whispered.

The next morning she had come carefully dressed in a navy-blue skirt and a white blouse with a little lace collar, but it was already too late. The girls called her 'Your Ladyship', or if they wanted to be especially mean, 'Your Royal Highness' or 'Princess Sophie'. All through the training, they made game of the way she spoke, the clothes she wore, the way she did her hair, and especially whenever she was praised by Mr Cooper or Claudine, the store window-dresser.

She had tried hard to look unconcerned, and not to let her feelings show. Papa had always said that in times of war, the most important thing was never to let the enemy see that you were intimidated. Remembering this she saw his face again, almost as if he were standing right in front of her with his bright, dark eyes and neat moustache. He would have been pacing up and down on the hearth rug in his study,

the walls hung with maps and treasures he had brought back from distant lands, relating one of his many stories about battles and military campaigns. *Keep calm, keep your head, keep a stiff upper lip*: those were his mottoes. But the truth was, the more she ignored the other shop girls, the worse they seemed to become. They said she was haughty and high-and-mighty, and called her the name she hated most, 'Sour-milk Sophie'. Not for the first time, she reflected that perhaps Papa's advice was not *entirely* helpful when it came to dealing with horrid shop girls.

Now, she turned away and went out into the passage, the boy trailing behind her. He looked so miserable that she felt a twinge of guilt for having assumed that he would make fun of her, when, in fact, it seemed that they were in the same boat.

'I shouldn't pay any attention to them,' she said.

The boy tried to smile. 'I really wasn't spying on you – honest, I wasn't,' he said anxiously. 'I just wanted to finish my serial. I didn't even notice you were there. It's the latest Montgomery Baxter.' Seeing that she looked blank, he went on: 'It's about a detective. He's only a boy, you see, but somehow he always solves the crime and outwits the villain, even when no one else can.' He beamed at her enthusiastically and, rather to her surprise, Sophie found herself smiling back. 'I just had to find somewhere out of

sight to finish it, so Mr Cooper didn't catch me reading. Anyway, I'm sorry I tripped you up,' he finished.

'It doesn't matter,' said Sophie. She held out her hand politely, like Miss Pennyfeather had taught her. 'I'm Sophie Taylor. I'm in the Millinery Department.' She had already learned that using her full name, Taylor-Cavendish, would do her no favours here at Sinclair's. It was safer to stick to plain old Taylor.

'Billy Parker, apprentice porter,' he explained, accepting her hand and giving it a firm shake.

'Parker? Then are you –?'

'Related to Sidney Parker? Yes. He's my uncle, worse luck,' Billy said, grimacing. 'Oh cripes, and here he comes now,' he murmured in a lower voice, hastily stuffing the creased story-paper into his pocket as a man came striding towards them along the passageway.

Like everyone else at Sinclair's, Sophie already knew exactly who Sidney Parker was. He was Head Doorman, in charge of the whole team of doormen and porters, and Mr Cooper's right-hand man. Tall and handsome in a bullish sort of way, he was impossible to miss in his immaculate uniform. With his hat perfectly brushed, his buttons gleaming and his glossy black moustache always smoothed into place, he couldn't have been more different from his untidy nephew.

'Good morning, miss,' he said, sweeping off his hat with the respectful manner he used for all ladies. Then he turned to Billy. 'Where do you think you've been? Stand up straight, lad – and cheer up, can't you? You look like a wet weekend.'

He winked at Sophie as though they were sharing a joke at Billy's expense and then swung the door that led to the shop floor open for her with exaggerated politeness. Throwing a quick smile over her shoulder to Billy, she walked out of the passageway.