No Peace for the Wicked

Pip Granger

Chapter 1

Everybody called it 'Freddy the Frock's', but in fact the theatrical costumier's where I worked was owned and run by Freddy and his partner Antony. My job had become the best part of my life since I had been there. I loved the shop and its gorgeous fabrics, I loved the colourful customers and I adored my two bosses. I thought I had strayed into Wonderland the very first time I walked into the place and it still felt like Wonderland to me a year or two later.

The immediate thing that confronted me as I walked nervously through the door on my first day was a hundred empty eye sockets belonging to a display of masks on the wall opposite the door. Some were glamorous jewelled eye masks, incredibly elaborate in shape and decoration and held on sticks. Others depicted fearsome characters like phantoms, monsters and devils, and were fixed to the head with elastic that was meant to be hidden by an appropriate hat. In the back room were stands that held whole heads, like asses or cows with crumpled horns; but we didn't keep many of those, as they took up too much room. They were hauled out of storage as and when they were needed, along with the theatrical armour, Puss in Boots's boots, Tinkerbell's wings and Captain Hook's hook and jacket, complete with ticking crocodile.

The counter ran the whole width of the shop so we could roll out bolts of fabric and measure them against the brass yard rule attached to its edge. The counter of mellow beech wood had seen years of service, long before Freddy and Antony's time. Some time in the eighteenth century, number 7 St Anne's Court had become a haberdasher's, and was one still when Freddy and Antony had taken over the premises just after the war.

Located right in the middle of Soho, the shop was close at hand for the many theatres and clubs of the West End. We also had a modest sideline in bespoke evening wear for ladies. In 1956, glamorous evening wear was a must for any self-respecting, well-turned-out lady with a social life. The theatre, smart restaurants, clubs and, of course, the debutante circuit all required the right formal clothes. Freddy and Antony were just the chaps to design and make them, and all the local show business girls and cabaret artists, as well as the ladies of leisure from the posh squares round and about, knew it.

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On the wall behind the counter were shelves piled up with bolts of fabric that filled every inch available. Silk, satin, sequin-, jewel- or ribbonencrusted voile and plain old cotton organdie glowed in every colour imaginable. Then there were the trims. A whole wall was devoted to trims - rhinestones, diamanté, sequins, silk flowers, tassels and pearls sewn on backing strips and sold by the yard.

Beneath the counter were drawers and drawers of buttons, hooks, eyes, press studs, zips, bias binding, sequins, jewels and pearl drops sorted by colour and type. A full-length mirror disguised the door to the workroom behind. Tucked away in one corner was the stockroom with the lavatory and basin.

The place was an earthly heaven for a person as starved of colour as I had been all my life, and I took to being the shop's assistant and general dogsbody like a duck takes to its pond. I felt as if I had come home - which was strange when you consider how drab my home had really been. But as time had gone on, and to my utter astonishment, it had become apparent to my bosses that I had an unsuspected talent.

'I've never known anyone with an eye for colour like our Lizzie's. She just has to give a body the once-over and she's taken in skin tone, eyes, hair, the lot,' Freddy boasted to a plump Widow Twankey as he stuffed a set of huge false bosoms down the front of the frock. 'Next thing you know, she's back with just the colours to suit. She never fails. What's more, she's got a colour memory second to none, ducky, second to none!'

Freddy completely ignored the fact that I was standing right next to him and was blushing furiously. I wasn't used to being shown off like some kind of prize. I'd been taught to stick close to the woodwork and leave the limelight for others.

Freddy reminded me of a brilliant little dragonfly as he darted back and forth, tweaking a sleeve here and a dart there, head tilted and eyes narrowed as he assessed the figure before him. Freddy was small for a man, being around five and a half feet tall, with a slender, wiry figure and small hands and feet to match. He had the face of an angelic schoolboy, complete with thick dark hair that flopped fetchingly over his forehead in a fringe. His narrow face was blessed with large, beautiful, brown eyes that could sparkle with merriment, melt with sympathy, flutter with pleading or glitter with irritation as the situation demanded. He also had

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several inches of thick, dark lashes, envied by every woman who ever crossed his path.

Had he been an actor, he would have been the young man who skipped on to the stage wearing tennis trousers and a Fair Isle sweater, waved a racquet and asked if there was 'Anyone for tennis?' The resemblance disappeared when he spoke. His appearance may have suggested the playing fields of Eton, but his voice was pure East Acton alley.

'It means she can hold colour in her mind's eye, and doesn't have to take a swatch with her,' Freddy explained to Widow Twankey - whose mind was firmly fixed on the three o'clock at Aintree, judging by the well-thumbed racing paper in his hand and the dog-end that smouldered unregarded in the corner of his mouth.

'I've seen her do it.' Freddy carried on blithely, utterly unaware of his unresponsive audience and his squirming assistant. 'We were in some fashion department, Selfridges I think, poaching ideas, when she swooped down on this scarf which was the exact same shade of blue as a frock we'd made a fortnight before! Now blues don't always go with each other, and there's loads of different shades, so it's not easy to match, or complement either, not from memory it isn't. Madam over there does it easy as you please.' Freddy shrugged philosophically, indicating that there was no explaining the phenomenon. Funny thing was, I'd never thought anything of it. I thought everyone could do it, but apparently not.

'So now we always send her out to pick up any bits and bobs we might need to finish a garment.' He gave an almighty yank to Widow Twankey's left sleeve and there was an ominous ripping sound from the tacking stitches that held it on. 'Oh bugger! Can you sew that back on again, Lizzie, while I get the skirt right?' Freddy asked.

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