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The Dressmaker

Written by Beryl Bainbridge

Published by Abacus

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THE DRESSMAKER

Beryl Bainbridge

ABACUS

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First published in Great Britain in 1973 by Duckworth
This paperback edition published in 2010 by Abacus

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A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-0-349-12370-7

Typeset in Palatino by Palimpsest Book Production Limited,
Falkirk, Stirlingshire
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

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Abacus
An imprint of
Little, Brown Book Group
100 Victoria Embankment
London EC4Y 0DY

An Hachette UK Company
www.hachette.co.uk

www.littlebrown.co.uk

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Afterwards she went through into the little front room, the tape measure still dangling about her neck, and allowed herself a glass of port. And in the dark she wiped at the surface of the polished sideboard with the edge of her flowered pinny in case the bottle had left a ring. She could hear Marge at the sink in the scullery, washing her hands. That tin bowl made a deafening noise. She nearly shouted for her to stop it, but instead she sat down on mother's old sofa, re-upholstered in LMS material bought at a sale, and immediately, in spite of the desperate cold of the unused room, the Christmas drink went to her head. She had to bite on her lip to keep from smiling. The light from the hallway shone on the carpet, red and brown and good as new from all the years she had spent caring for it. Here at least everything was ordered, secure. The removal of the rosewood table had been a terrible mistake, but it was foolish to blame herself for what had happened. There was nothing Mother could take umbrage at in the whole room – not even the little mirror bordered in green velvet with the red roses painted on the glass – because the crack across one corner, as she could prove, was war damage, not neglect or carelessness. The blast from a bomb dropped in Priory Road had knocked it off the wall,

killing twelve people, including Mrs Eccles's fancy man at the corner shop, and cracked Mother's mirror.

'Are you all right then, Nellie?'

Margo was in the doorway watching her. Mother had always warned her to keep an eye on Marge. Such a foolish girl. The way she had carried on about Mr Aveyard. He hadn't been a well man, nor young, and she would have lost her widow's pension into the bargain. Fancy throwing away her independence just for the honour of siding his table and darning his combs. It had taken a lot to persuade her, but in the end she'd seen the sense in it – sent Mr Aveyard packing into the bright blue yonder; but her face, the look in her eyes for all to see – there was something indecent in the explicitness of her expression.

She'd said: 'You would only have been a drudge for him, Marge.' And Marge said: 'Yes, I know, Nellie.' But her eyes, then as now, burned with the secrets of experience.

'Let me be,' said Nellie. 'I'll be through in a moment.'

Valerie had been right about a belt for the engagement dress. It would add the final touch. She let her eyes close and dozed as if she were sitting in the sun, her two stout legs thrust out across Mother's carpet, threads of green cotton clinging to her stockings.

She was awakened by voices coming from the kitchen. She listened for a moment before getting to her feet. Rita had come in and was weeping again. She was at the age for it, but it was trying for all concerned.

'Oh, Auntie, I wish I was dead.' She didn't mean it of course.

Marge was saying, 'Shh, shh,' trying to keep her quiet.

Beyond the lace curtains something glittered. Jack had pasted strips of asbestos to protect the glass, sticky to the touch, but she could just make out a square of red brick wall and the little dusty clump of privet stuck in the patch of dirt beneath the window, all pale and gleaming like a bush in flower, frozen in moonlight. She smoothed the folds of the lace curtains, rearranging the milky fragments of privet, distracted by the sounds from the next room. If that girl didn't stop her whingeing, the neighbours would be banging on the wall; God knows, there'd been enough disturbance for one night.

She went into the hall, hiding the wine glass in the pocket of her apron. She swept broken glass into a heap and wrapped the pieces in newspaper; knelt to pick out between finger and thumb fragments embedded in the dust mat at the front door. She found an imitation pearl that Marge had overlooked, lying like a peppermint on the stair. She went into the kitchen with her parcel and laid it on the table.

'Valerie Mander says her Chuck hasn't seen him in over a week,' wailed Rita.

'Shh,' Margo said again, putting her arms about the girl to calm her, looking up at Nellie with entreaty in her eyes, no colour at all in her thin cheeks.

'That's enough, Rita. It's no use crying over spilt milk,' said Nellie. 'You're better off without him.' Which was the truth, surely, though she had not meant to shout so loud.

'Turn that gas off, Marge,' she ordered and not waiting went into the scullery to turn off the ring under the kettle.

'But we always have a cup of tea before bed,' said Rita, lifting an exhausted face in protest, and Margo said for the umpteenth time, 'Shhh, shhh,' in that daft way.

The girl washed in the scullery while the two women prepared for bed. The reflection of her bony face, pale with loss, flittered across the surface of the tarnished mirror above the sink. She bent her head and moaned, quite worn out by the depths of her emotion. A shadow leapt against the pane of glass high on the wall among the frying pans. She looked up startled, a piece of frayed towel held to her mouth, and opened the back door to let the cat in.

She called: 'Come on, Nigger, come on, Nigger!'

'Shut that door!' Her aunt's voice was harsh with irritation.

'Can't the cat come in then, Auntie?'

'No, leave it out.' But Nigger was in, streaking across the lino into the kitchen, up in one bound on to the sofa, eyes gleaming.

Rita went into the hall to put away her shoes in the space under the stairs. When she came back, Auntie Marge was standing on the table, reaching up to the gasolier with its pink fluted shades, showing a portion of leg where her nightie rode up. Nellie held her firmly by the ankle, in case she should turn dizzy.

'Where's the other half of the curtain under the stairs, Auntie Nellie?' asked Rita.

Nellie had her hairnet on and her teeth out. When the gas died, her face looked bruised in the firelight. She didn't answer. She tugged at Marge's gown and told her

to come down, which she did, teetering wildly for a moment on the edge of the chair before reaching the floor and going at once to the sideboard. She fiddled about among the knives and forks, bringing out a packet of American cigarettes. At the sight of them the girl's face crumpled. She flung herself on her knees and buried her head in her aunt's lap as she sat down by the fire.

'Oh, Auntie,' she cried, muffled in flannel, 'I do love him.'

Nellie could see Marge's hand with the thin band of gold encircling her finger, stroking the girl's bent head. The packet of cigarettes slithered to the rug. With a puritanical flick of her wrist, Nellie flung them clear to the back of the grate.

'You daft beggar, it was a full packet.'

Margo was outraged, looking up with hatred at her sister. But she quailed before the fury of the older woman.

'Shhh,' she said over and over to the girl at her knee, gazing sullenly at the cigarettes consumed by flame.

Nellie took the newspaper parcel into the scullery. She returned and stood at the mantelpiece holding her clenched fist out over the fire. The eyes of the cat flicked wide. The flames spat. Wax melted over the coals.

Rita said, startled: 'What's that?'

'Someone knocked over the little wax man in the hall. It's broken.'

The girl sat upright, the tear-stained oblong of her face full of accusation.

'The little wax man?'

'Don't look like that, Miss. It couldn't be helped.'

Nellie sucked the pad of her finger where a splinter of glass had penetrated, adding, so that the girl would know where to apportion blame: 'Your dad knocked it over.'

'Uncle Jack? Has Uncle Jack been, then?'

She looked from one aunt to the other, but there was no reply. Nellie bolted the back door and brought a jug of water to pour on the coals. The smoke billowed outwards. The cat sprang from its place on the sofa and went with disgust to lie on the heap of newspapers behind the door.

Auntie Margo said: 'Poor old Nigger, he doesn't like that,' beginning to laugh deep in her throat and bringing her hand up to her mouth to smother the sound. Turning her face to the grate, she stared into the dampened fire.

Rita was puzzled about Uncle Jack coming. He only came round on a Saturday with the Sunday joint.

'Did Uncle Jack come about the engagement party, then?' she wanted to know. 'Is he getting Valerie Mander a cut of meat?'

'Bed,' said Nellie, but not unkindly. By now Jack would be on the dock road, heading towards Bootle. She waited in the hallway while Rita and Marge went upstairs. She let them get settled before leaning over the stair rail to extinguish the gas light.

'Are you in?' she called after a moment.

Rita could hear the banister creaking as Nellie hauled herself up the stairs. On the dark landing her bare feet smacked against the lino.

'Are you cold, Rita?'

'Yes, Auntie.'

'You best come in with us.'

She didn't want the girl having that nightmare. She hadn't had it for several weeks, but she was obviously upset, fretting herself. It was best to have her near. They'd all catch their death of cold shenaniging about in the middle of the night.

Rita climbed on to the bed and slid down between the two women, putting her head under the starched sheets to shut out the cruel night air and the heart-beat of the alarm clock set for six, thinking it absurd that she should even attempt to close her eyes when her mind wandered so restlessly back and forth in search of the happiness she had lost, and falling asleep even while her head nuzzled more comfortably into the stiff linen cover of the bolster. From time to time she whimpered; and Margo snored, curled up against Rita, with one arm flung out across the green silk counterpane, cold as glass, joined to the girl by a strand of hair caught on her dry upper lip.

Nellie dreamed she was following Mother down a country garden, severing with sharp scissors the heads of roses.

1

It was late August when Valerie Mander asked Rita to the party.

'Well, it's more of a sing-song, really,' she amended. 'But you'll enjoy yourself. Tell your Uncle Jack you're a big girl now.' And off she went up the street, swinging her handbag and tilting her head slightly to catch the warmth of the sun.

Rita had first seen her on the tram coming home from work, but she hadn't let on. She had been travelling since the Pier Head, wedged hard against the window near the platform. When the tram stopped opposite the bomb site that had been Blackler's store, she hadn't noticed the people boarding, only moved her feet to avoid being trampled, gazing out at the rumpled meadow on the corner of the city street; thinking of Nellie working there at the beginning of the war, on the material counter facing millinery, shearing with her sharp steel scissors through the yards of silk and satin and velveteen, taking such pride in the great bales of cloth, smoothing them with her hands, plucking with disapproval at the minute frayed ends. To no avail. When the roof split open, the prams and bedding spilled from the top floor to the next, mingling with Auntie Nellie's rolls of dress material, snaking out wantonly into the burning night, flying

outwards higgledy piggledy, with the smart hats hurled from their stands, the frail gauze veils spotted with sequins shrivelling like cobwebs, tumbling down through the air to be buried under the bricks and the iron girders – covered now by the grass and the great clumps of weed that sprouted flowers, rusty red and purple, their heads swinging like foxgloves as the tram lurched round the corner and began the steep ascent to Everton Brow. Only then did she glance up and see Valerie standing with one white-gloved hand raised to clutch the leather strap for support, her head swathed in a cream turban and a diamante button clipped to the hidden lobe of her ear.

Rita hung her head to avoid involvement, hoping that Valerie would not look in her direction, ready to spring to her feet and be off when her stop came. But outside the Cabbage Hall cinema, a horse pulling its coal cart took fright at an army lorry passing too close. Feet sliding on the cobblestones, it shied sideways into the traffic. Rita hesitated, was too afraid to run in front of its hooves and heard Valerie calling her name. She was forced to walk the length of Priory Road with her, dreadfully inadequate and cheeks pink with resentment. It wasn't that she felt herself to be inferior, it was more that the overwhelming ripeness and confidence of the older girl caused her acute embarrassment. Valerie was larger than life, prancing along the pavement with her heavy body clothed in a green and white frock made by Auntie Nellie, arching her plucked brows, fluttering her eyelashes shiny with vaseline, opening and closing her

moist mouth, the colour of plums. It was the glossiness of her.

'Your Auntie Nellie said you were working in Dale Street now.'

'Yes, since April.'

'What's it like, then? All right is it, Rita?'

'Yes, it's very nice, thank you.'

'What do you do, then?' Persistent. Trying to communicate. Trotting in her wedge-heeled shoes past the red-brick houses and the small shops and the ragged plane trees, windswept on every corner.

'Not much, really. I run messages for Mr Betts sometimes.'

'Well, that's not much, is it?' A kind of criticism in her voice. 'I thought you were good at English?'

'Me Auntie Margo was getting me a job with her in the factory at Speke.'

'Oh yes.'

In sight now, the tin hoarding high on the wall at the corner of Bingley Road, advertising Gold Flake.

'Auntie Nellie said they weren't a nice class of girl.'

They walked under the lettering, bright yellow and two-foot high, set against a sea of deepest blue, one corner eaten by rust. It was Valerie that had told Aunt Nellie that she was too pale to wear bright colours . . . 'Your Rita hasn't the complexion for it' . . . and Nellie took notice of her. Until then she had felt like a pillar-box every winter, decked out in a scarlet coat with a hat and handbag to match.

They crossed the road and went into the shadow of

the air-raid shelter in the middle of the street, its concrete roof blotched by rain and a black and white cat prowling its length.

It was then Valerie asked her what she did on a Saturday night, though she knew, she must have done. She knew what Valerie did. Mrs Mander told Nellie all about her daughter's opportunities and what young man was courting her and how she'd been to a tea-dance at Reece's Ballroom and an evening do at the Locarno and what the fellow at the Ladies' Hot Pot Supper night had said about her. Nellie discussed it often with Margo, and neither of them seemed to think it strange that what was all right for Valerie was all wrong for other girls living in the street. Just fast, they were. But then Valerie, as Auntie Nellie never tired of reiterating, was a lovely girl and she did know how to take care of herself.

Aunt Nellie had just sent the man from the Pru on his way, richer by her sixpence a week, when Rita got home. It was for her funeral, so that Jack wouldn't have the expense. Around her neck she wore her tape measure like a scarf and a row of pins stuck in the bodice of her black dress. On Sundays she exchanged the white measure for a fox fur, holding the thin little paws in her hand as she went on her own to the church. She stood at her pastry board in the scullery, coating three pieces of fish with flour. She told Rita to set the table, adding: 'Get a move on, chuck. I've Mrs Lyons coming for a fitting after tea.'

'I met Valerie Mander on the tram,' said Rita, collecting plates from the shelf above the cooker. 'They're having a party on Saturday.'

She took the plates into the kitchen and left them on the sideboard, while she removed the table runner and the yellow vase full of dressmaking pins.

'I know,' Nellie said. 'Well, it's more of a sing-song, really. What was she wearing?'

'She asked me.'

Rita unfolded the white cloth and smoothed it flat on the table. Aunt Nellie was so surprised she came through from the scullery with the frying pan in her hand.

'What did you say to her?'

'I said thank you very much.'

'Oh dear, I don't know that it's wise. I'm not at all sure.'

She shook her head and went to put the pan back on the stove. Rita arranged the plates, the knives and forks, the china salt cellar, a memento from Blackpool, the water jug, the pudding spoons and the three Woolworth glasses. Still Nellie kept silent. Only the fat hissing in the pan as the fish cooked. Rita sat on a chair sideways to the table, fingering the edge of the cloth embroidered with daisies, staring at the wall with her pale eyes patient. There was a picture of a landscape above the sewing machine: a blue lake and a swan sitting on the water and the green grass fading into a cloudy sky. There was also the window framed in blackout curtains showing a brick wall and a wooden door that opened on to the alleyway, through which Auntie Margo would come presently to persuade

Nellie. She watched Nigger the cat crawl silently along the wall of the roof of the outhouse where her aunt kept the dolly tub and the mangle.

Nellie called: 'What about your Uncle Jack coming?'

'Valerie Mander said to tell him I was a big girl now.'

She looked at her aunt and saw she was smiling. She was all admiration for the lovely girl, so outspoken. She nodded her head wonderingly, jiggling the frying pan about to stop the fish from sticking. 'That Valerie,' she observed, 'she's a card.'

As soon as Margo came in, the food was put on the table. She sat at the edge of the hearth like a man, splaying her knees wide and rolling a cigarette.

'Sit decent,' said Auntie Nellie, scraping margarine from a dish and covering her bread sparingly.

It was one of Marge's irritating habits to ignore what was on her plate till it had gone like ice and then she would say, 'By heck, Nellie, this is blooming cold.' Some nights she was quite dry about her day at the factory, telling them in accurate detail the remarks screamed by her fellow-workers above the noise of the machines. She said she couldn't repeat everything they said because she had to be guarded as careless talk cost lives. Nellie got all exasperated and said that was foolishness, it was more like some of those women needed their mouths washing out with carbolic soap. Marge said that ten minutes before the whistle blew for the end of the day shift, the disabled left by the side gate, two hundred of them, in chairs, on crutches, limping and lurching down

the invalid ramp on to the pavement – like a hospital evacuating at the start of a fire. Shortly afterwards came the speed merchants on bicycles, streams of them, ringing the little bells on their handlebars, wheeling in formation out of the main gates and swooping away down the hill to the town. How rough they were, how quick to take offence and come to blows. The women were worse than the men. Mr Newall, the foreman of her section, was given the glad eye by a different girl each week. But tonight Margo had nothing to tell them. She sat gloomily at the side of the empty grate, rubbing the tips of her fingers through her sparse sand-coloured hair, jerking her neck from side to side as if she were keeping time to some tune in her head. She listened to the six o'clock news before joining them at the table. She stirred her tea so savagely that some spilled into the saucer.

'What's up with you, then?' asked Nellie aggressively, as if it were a personal affront to her that Marge was out of sorts.

'It's the machines, they get on my nerves. Everyone complains of their nerves.'

'Well, it's your own fault,' Nellie said with satisfaction. 'You had no need to go into munitions in the first place.'

'Get away. I was requisitioned.'

'That job at Belmont Road Hospital was quite good enough.'

They stared at each other with hostility, their mouths munching food.

Rita said: 'Was that where those naughty girls were?' They both turned and looked at her, sitting in her pink frock with the white cotton collar that could be removed and washed separately. 'The girls with the shaved heads – to stop them running away?'

She had a picture in her head of a green tiled hall and a long corridor with its floor shining with beeswax and two figures walking towards her in dressing-gowns and slippers. Above the thin stalks of their necks two naked heads with lidless eyes and sunken mouths and on each fragile curve of skull nothing but a faint down that quivered as they moved. Like birds fallen from a nest.

'Who told her that?' Margo demanded, though she knew.

Nellie held her to one side as if she were listening to the wireless.

'Who told her a daft thing like that?' persisted Marge.

'Auntie Nellie said they had things in their hair.' She wished she had not spoken.

'You don't go to hospital for nits, Rita.'

Auntie Nellie stiffened in disgust.

'You're so common, Marge. That factory has coarsened you beyond belief.'

A shred of potato dropped from her lips to the plate. Mortified, she dabbed at her chin with a serviette, shaking her head sorrowfully.

'You're a foolish girl. I thank God Mother has been spared from seeing the way you've turned out.'

It was as if she were talking about a cake that hadn't risen properly. Rita could tell Auntie Margo was giddy

with indignation. It wasn't a tactful remark to make to someone who had spent ten hours on the factory floor, clad in cumbersome protective clothing, grease daubed on her face and a white cloth bound about her head. It was all right for Auntie Nellie to live grimly through each day, doing the washing, trying to find enough nourishment to give them, sewing her dresses – she was only marking time for the singing to come in the next world and her reunion with Mother. It was different for Margo, a foolish girl of fifty years of age; she needed to come home, now, and find that somebody waited. How colourless were her lips, how dark the shadows beneath her eyes.

'Rita,' cried her aunt, looking at her across the table severely, 'those naughty girls, as your Auntie Nellie saw fit to call them, had a flipping sight more wrong with them than nits. It wasn't only their heads they shaved neither.'

And she broke into a cackle of laughter, eyes growing moist, leaning back in her chair at the joke. She was silent then, having gone as far as she dared, contenting herself with a mocking grin worn for the benefit of Nellie, tears of amusement at the corners of her glittering eyes.

When the meal was finished Nellie said: 'Rita, tell your Auntie Marge about Valerie Mander.'

She spoke coldly, on her dignity, making a great show of siding the table before taking the dishes to the sink. Margo half rose to help, because Nellie, when put out, could appear to be suffering, her white hair plastered to her head in waves and a Kirby grip to keep it neat, and

that disappointed droop to her mouth. But she sat down again at this.

'What about Valerie Mander?'

'She asked me to a party.'

'She never,' said her aunt, looking at her in astonishment.

'She did. On Saturday.'

'What does your Auntie Nellie say?'

'She doesn't know if it's wise.'

They both looked down at the surface of the white tablecloth, thinking it over. On the beige wall the eight-day clock chimed the half-hour. In the kitchen they could hear Nellie swishing her hands about in the water to make it seem she was above listening.

'Do you want to go, then?'

'I don't know.'

'Won't you be shy?'

'I'm not shy.'

She met her aunt's eye briefly, and away again, looking at the dull black sewing machine with its iron treadle still tilted from the pressure of the dressmaker's foot.

'She's not got anything to wear,' Nellie said, coming to stand in the doorway, twisting her hands about in her apron to dry them.

'If that doesn't beat the band! You put dresses on the backs of half the women in the street and you say our Rita's got nothing to wear.'

Nellie had to see the fairness of that. She was never unreasonable. She supposed she could alter something in time if the child was really keen. Neither of them

looked at Rita to see what she felt. Or they could pool their clothing coupons and go to George Henry Lees' for a new frock. That might be best.

They were interrupted by the arrival of Mrs Lyons, come for her fitting. Rita curled herself up on the sofa with a library book and the cat. She murmured 'Good-evening' to Mrs Lyons, keeping her eyes down to the printed page as the stout lady stepped out of her skirt and stood in her slip on the rug.

Nellie put a match to the fire so that Mrs Lyons wouldn't catch her death. She grudged every morsel of coal burned in summer time, but she couldn't afford to lose her customers. Even so, the room took some time to warm, and it wasn't till Mrs Lyons had left that the benefit could be felt. Nellie made a pot of tea before getting ready for bed, spooning the sugar into Marge's cup and hiding the basin before Marge could help herself. The aunts put on their flannel nightgowns over their clothes and then undressed, poking up the fire to make a blaze before removing their corsets. The girl sat withdrawn on the sofa, stroking the spine of the cat, while the two women grunted and twisted on the hearth rug, struggling to undo the numerous hooks that confined them, until, panting and triumphant, they tore free the great pink garments and dropped them to the floor, where they lay like cricket pads, still holding the shape of their owners, and the little dangling suspenders sparkling in the firelight. Dull then after such exertions, mesmerised by the heat of the fire, the aunts stood rubbing the flannel nightgowns to and fro across their stomachs,

breathing slow and deep. After a while they sat down on either side of the fender and removed their stockings. Out on the woollen rug, lastly, came their strange yellow feet, the toes curled inwards against the warmth.

'Rita,' said Nellie, picking up the half-furled corsets, rolling them tidily like schoolroom maps, 'what sort of dress shall it be for the party?'

'It's not a party,' said Rita. 'It's just a bit of a sing-song.'

She said she didn't know what the fuss was about. She didn't want anything altered nor did she need a new frock. She knew she would have to go, if only for the sake of Margo. Left to herself, she mightn't have bothered. But at some point on Saturday Margo would start to apply rouge and powder, saying she was thinking of popping along to the Manders' to keep the child company. And Nellie would say she was pushing herself, and they would start to argue, until turning to her they would remind each other of the time, telling her she must hurry, comb her hair, change her frock.

'Don't you want to look nice?' cried Nellie.

But Rita wouldn't discuss it any further. She went upstairs on her own to bed, leaving them muttering by the fire.