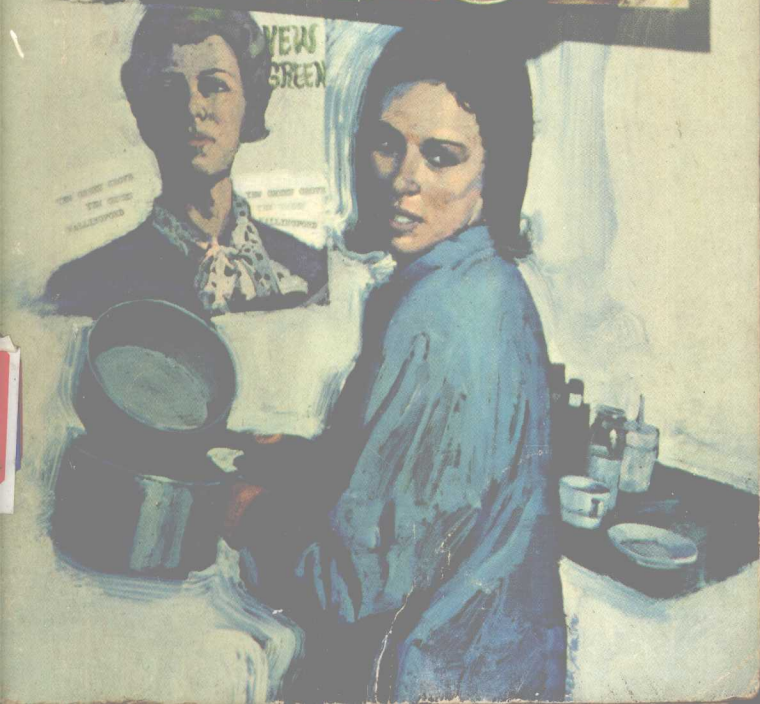


7340  
Monica Dickens  
One Pair of Hands



7

PENGUIN BOOKS

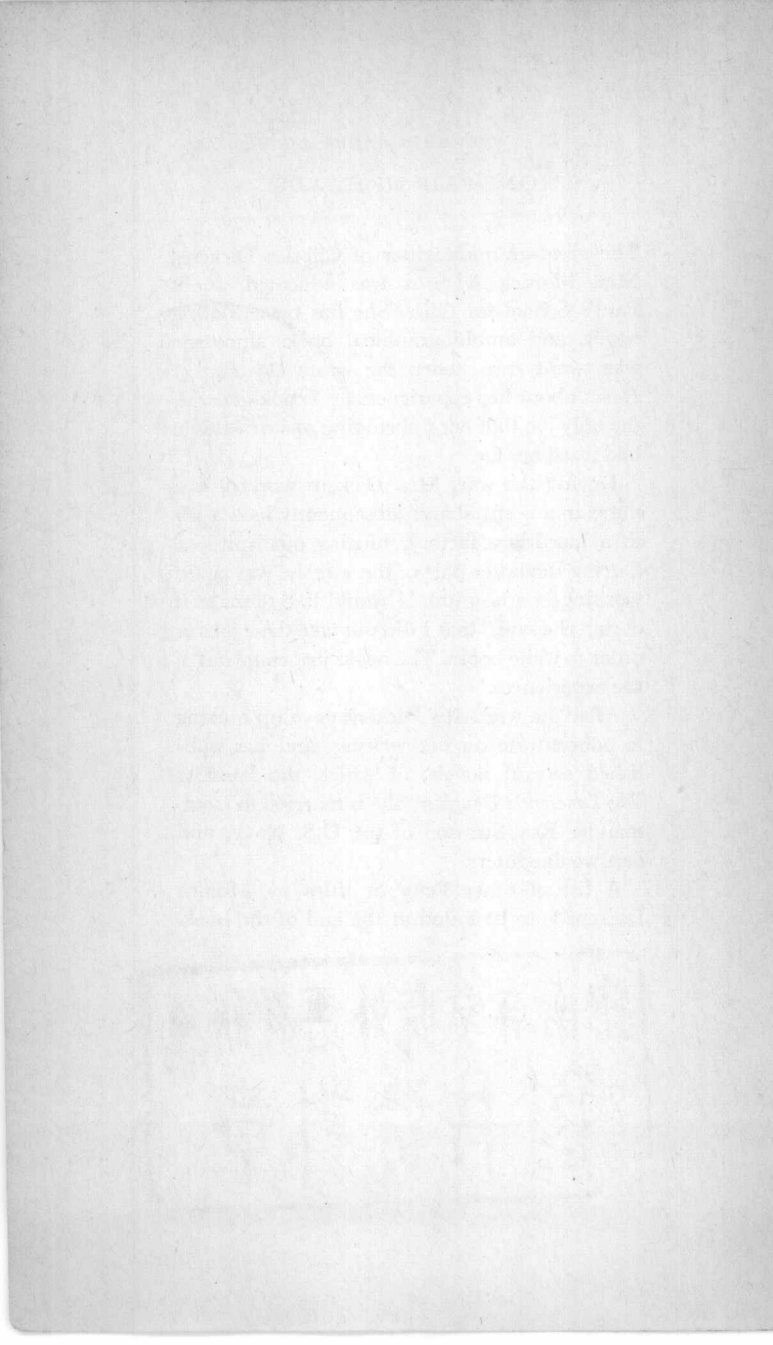
## ONE PAIR OF HANDS

The great-granddaughter of Charles Dickens, Miss Monica Dickens was educated at St Paul's School for Girls. She has been writing novels and autobiographical books since she was twenty-two, when she wrote *One Pair of Hands* about her experiences as a cook-general, the only job that her upbringing as a débutante had fitted her for.

During the war, Miss Dickens worked as a nurse in a hospital and subsequently took a job in a munitions factory, turning out Spitfires. During the latter part of the war she was again working in a hospital. 'I would like to make it clear,' she says, 'that I did not take these jobs in order to write books. The books just came out of the experiences.'

After the war Miss Dickens gave up nursing to concentrate on her writing, and has published several novels, of which the latest is *The Landlord's Daughter*. She is married to Commander Roy Stratton of the U.S. Navy, and has two daughters.

A list of other Penguin titles by Monica Dickens is to be found at the end of the book.



# ONE PAIR OF HANDS

---

*Monica Dickens*



PENGUIN BOOKS

IN ASSOCIATION WITH

MICHAEL JOSEPH

Penguin Books Ltd, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England  
Penguin Books Australia Ltd, Ringwood, Victoria, Australia

---

First published by Michael Joseph 1939  
Published in Penguin Books 1961  
Reprinted 1963, 1964, 1966, 1967, 1969, 1971, 1972, 1974

---

Copyright © Monica Dickens, 1939

---

Made and printed in Great Britain  
by C. Nicholls & Company Ltd  
Set in Monotype Baskerville

This book is sold subject to the condition  
that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise,  
be lent, re-sold, hired out, or otherwise circulated  
without the publisher's prior consent in any form o  
binding or cover other than that in which it is  
published and without a similar condition  
including this condition being imposed  
on the subsequent purchaser

## Chapter One

I WAS fed up. As I lay awake in the grey small hours of an autumn morning, I reviewed my life. Three a.m. is not the most propitious time for meditation, as everyone knows, and a deep depression was settling over me.

I had just returned from New York, where the crazy cyclone of gaiety in which people seem to survive over there had caught me up, whirled me blissfully round, and dropped me into a London which seemed flat and dull. I felt restless, dissatisfied, and abominably bad-tempered.

'Surely,' I thought, 'there's something more to life than just going out to parties that one doesn't enjoy, with people one doesn't even like? What a pointless existence it is – drifting about in the hope that something may happen to relieve the monotony. Something has got to be done to get me out of this rut.'

In a flash it came to me:

'I'll have a job!'

I said it out loud and it sounded pretty good to me, though my dog didn't seem to be deeply moved. The more I thought about it, the better I liked the idea, especially from the point of view of making some money.

My mind sped away for a moment, after the fashion of all minds in bed, and showed me visions of big money – furs – a new car – but I brought it back to earth with an effort to wonder for what sort of a job I could possibly qualify. I reviewed the possibilities.

Since leaving school I had trained rather half-heartedly for various things. I had an idea, as everyone does at that age, that I should be a roaring success on the stage. When I came back from being 'finished' in Paris, I had begged to be allowed to have dramatic training.

'Try anything once,' said my parents, so off I went, full of hope and ambition, to a London dramatic school. I

hadn't been there more than two weeks before I and everybody else in the place discovered that I couldn't act, and, probably, never would be able to. This was discouraging, but I ploughed on, getting a greater inferiority complex every day. Part of the policy of this school is to 'knock the corners off the girls' (not the men, they are too rare and precious). It is only the tough, really ambitious girls who weather the storm of biting sarcasm and offensive personal remarks that fall on their cowed heads. This is a good thing, really, as it means that only the ones with real talent and endurance go through with it to that even tougher life ahead. The uncertain and inept ones like myself are discouraged at the start from a career in which they could never make a success, and so are saved many heartbreaks later on.

Once having made up my mind that I had no vocation, I enjoyed my year there immensely, and walked about the stage quite happily as the maid, or somebody's sister, with hands and feet growing larger every minute. Gazing into a still pool at sunset, or registering grief, fear, and ecstasy in rapid succession, was wonderful fun, too: especially when performed in the company of fifty other girls in rather indecent black tights.

It didn't occur to me that it might be a little irritating for the authorities to have someone trailing unambitiously about in the dust raised by the star pupils. No one was more surprised than myself, therefore, when I found myself – thrown out, figuratively speaking, on my ear – standing on the pavement with my books under one arm and my black tights under the other.

The next possibility was dressmaking. I dismissed that, too, at once, because it has always seemed to me to be the resort of inefficient, but certainly decorative, society girls, who are given jobs in dress shops, in the hope that they will introduce their rich friends. After that, they stand about the place in streamlined attitudes, wearing marvellous clothes and expressions of suffering superiority.

That didn't seem quite my style, so I turned to cooking.

That was the thing which interested me most and about which I thought I knew quite a lot. I had had a few lessons from my 'Madame' in Paris, but my real interest was aroused by lessons I had at a wonderful school of French cookery in London.

I went there quite unable to boil so much as an egg and came out with Homard Thermidor and Crêpes Suzette at my fingertips. I was still unable to boil an egg, however, or roast a joint of beef. The simple things weren't considered worth teaching, so I had a short spell at a very drab school of English cooking, where there were a great many pupils clamouring for the attention of the two ancient spinsters who taught us. When they hadn't time to tell me what to cook next, it was: 'Get washed up, Miss Dickens,' and Miss Dickens had to clean up other people's messes at the sink, till, at last, if she was lucky she was allowed to make a rock-cake.

When I told my family that I was thinking of taking a cooking job, the roars of laughter were rather discouraging. No one believed that I could cook at all, as I had never had a chance to practise at home. Our cook, aged sixty-five and slightly touched, had ruled in the kitchen for thirty years and had an irritating tendency to regard the saucepans, stove, and indeed all the kitchen fittings as her own property.

I once crept down there when I thought she was asleep in her room to try out an omelette. Noiselessly I removed a frying-pan from its hook and the eggs from their cupboard. It was the pop of the gas that woke her, I think, for I was just breaking the first egg when a pair of slippered feet shuffled round the door and a shriek of horror caused me to break the egg on the floor. This disaster, together with the fact that I was using her one very special beloved and delicately nurtured frying-pan, upset cook so much that she locked herself in the larder with all the food and we had to make our Sunday dinner off bananas.

If the family weren't going to be helpful I would look for a job all by myself and not tell them about it till I'd got one. I had no idea of exactly what job I should apply for, so I



decided to go to an agency. I had seen one advertised in a local paper, so as soon as there was no one about to say, 'Where are you going?' I clapped on my mildest hat, and rushed out of the house in search of it. I was wildly excited, and as nervous as if I were going to a stage audition. Finding the place quite easily, I tore up three flights of stairs, and swung breathlessly through a door which said, 'Enter without knocking, if you please.'

The dingy, bottle-green atmosphere of the office sobered me, and I sat meekly down on the edge of a chair and could see my nose shining out of the corner of my eye. I thought perhaps it was a good thing, it might look more earnest. The woman at the desk opposite scrutinized me for a while through rimless pince-nez, and I became absorbed in the question of whether or not she wore a wig. I had just decided that it was too undesirably shabby to be anything but her own hair, when I realized that she was murmuring questions at me. I answered in a hoarse whisper because it seemed to be the thing, and because all of a sudden I started to feel rather pathetic. She hinted in a delicate way that she wondered why I was looking for this sort of job, so I felt impelled to give her a glimpse of a widowed mother and a desperate struggle against poverty. I almost made myself believe in the pathos of it, and we had to cough and change the subject. I felt even more pathetic when she told me that it would be difficult to get a job without experience or references. She rustled about among her papers for a bit and I wondered whether I ought to leave, when the telephone on her desk rang. While she was conducting a cryptic conversation she kept looking at me. Then I heard her say:

'As a matter of fact, I've got someone in the office at this very moment who might suit.' She wrote down a number, and my spirits soared as I took the slip of paper she held out to me, saying: 'Ring up this lady. She wants a cook immediately. In fact, you would have to start tomorrow by cooking a dinner for ten people. Could you manage that, I wonder?'

'Oh, yes,' said I - never having cooked for more than

four in my life. I thanked her profusely, paid a shilling, and dashed out to the nearest telephone box. I collected my wits, powdered my nose, took a deep breath, and dialled the number. A piping voice at the other end informed me that I was speaking to Miss Cattermole. I assured her, with all the bluff at my command, that I was just what she was looking for.

'Are you sure?' she kept saying. 'Are you *sure*? It's a celebration for my brother – just home from B.A., you know.' I expressed suitable awe, though for all I knew B.A. might have been anything from an outpost of Empire to a long spell of Penal Servitude, and she decided to engage me for the dinner-party, anyway, and as a permanency if I fulfilled the promise of my self-praise. I asked her what tomorrow's menu was to be.

'Just a small, simple dinner: lobster cocktails, soup, turbot Mornay, pheasants with vegetables, fruit salad, and a savoury.' In rather a shaken voice, I promised to turn up in good time, and rang off.

I spent the intervening hours feverishly reading cookery books, and wishing that I hadn't let myself in for something about which I knew so little. My family were still highly amused at the idea of my attempting it, which didn't increase my confidence. I told my mother she was a widow and she took it quite well.

Miss Cattermole lived in Dulwich in one of the most depressing houses ever seen. It had a great many grimy turrets and smatterings of stained glass, and though quite small, was approached by a semi-circular drive round an unhealthy tangle of laurels. I rang at the back door and the depression of the house closed round me as I was admitted by a weary-looking maid. She was so thin that her dress and apron drooped on her, and even her cap fell over her eyes as if the whole lot wanted to slide despairingly to the ground. I followed her through a sort of stone rabbit-warren to where an ancient brooding figure sat hunched in a chair in the sitting-room. She was introduced to me on a note of reverent horror, as: 'Nannie' – evidently a family

pensioner who had transferred her awesome sway from the nursery to the basement. It was quite obvious why Miss Cattermole had difficulty in keeping a cook. The maid was called away by a bell and Nannie condescended to show me the kitchen, though I could see that she hated me at sight.

As I started to prepare the dinner I began to share her gloomy view of myself, as it dawned on me more and more that high-class cooking lessons are all very well, but a little practical experience is necessary, too, in order to cope with the vicissitudes that crop up in the kitchen.

I made the fruit salad first. That was quite easy, as all I had to do was cut up fruit and mess it together in a bowl. After a bit, I got tired of scraping the pith off oranges, and I also caught sight of the time, so I pushed the rest, all stringy, to the bottom of the dish, and rushed the pheasants into the oven. Then I washed the vegetables sketchily, and put them on to cook. Feverishly I opened the tins of lobster. When I came to from the agonized delirium of a torn thumb, I was confronted by the problem of how on earth one made a lobster cocktail. I started to make them into a sticky mess with some tomato, thinned down with a little of my life-blood. At this critical point the mistress of the house careered into the kitchen in full feather.

The first impression one got of Miss Cattermole was like looking into one of those kaleidoscopes, in which coloured beads whirl about in a dazzle of changing patterns. When your eyes got used to her, she resolved into a mass of multi-coloured scarves, sewn haphazardly together, so that loose ends waved gaily from unlikely places to the answering flutter of straggling orange-wool hair. Out of this profusion, a pair of beady eyes darted a piercing glance of horror at my poor lobster.

'Oh, dear!' she shrilled. 'Is that the way you make lobster cocktails? It looks funny to me; oh, dear, I do hope everything's going to be all right. Are you *sure* - ' I saw the eyes jump round to where the turbot lay keeping warm. I had cooked it too early and it was getting harder and drier every minute while it waited for its sauce to cover it.

There was a desperate sinking feeling inside me, and I had to call to my aid all the bluff I knew.

I threw a careless shake of red pepper over the prawns, and, with the air of one who knows so much that it's almost boring, I drawled:

'Well, actually, I was talking to a famous chef the other day, and he gave me a special recipe – they use it at the Savoy, too. I thought you might like to have it, but, of course, if you prefer the ordinary –' I shrugged my shoulders, watching her closely from under scornfully-drooped eyelids. Would she buy it? She did. I had luckily hit upon a good line, for that gaudy exterior cloaked a drab little snobbish soul. She retired under my supercilious gaze and I returned frantically to my lobster. Dinner was at eight and it was already a quarter past seven. I discovered some cream and poured that on; the lobster began to look more appetizing; I wanted more cream and there was none, but I discovered three milk bottles in the larder, so I opened them all and used the top part. The lobster looked all right now, so I started to put them into their sherry glasses. I broke one, of course, and had to creep into the pantry when the sad thin maid wasn't looking to find another. I rushed back to the kitchen to sweep up the broken bits, as I could see a pair of silver slippers descending the stairs. I only just had time to kick the glass under the stove and pour more water on to the potatoes, which had boiled dry and were starting to burn, before taking up my stance, negligently stirring the soup. She smelled the potatoes, of course, so I opened the oven door and took her mind off them with a fine smell of roasting as I basted the pheasants.

'It just came into my mind that some tomatoes and mushrooms would be rather tasty lying round the dish,' she said; 'there should be some in the larder.' My silent curses followed her as she withdrew. I would never be ready in time! I put the tomatoes into the soup to loosen their skins and one of them burst and I had to strain the soup. Thank goodness I had been taught at the French school that mushrooms taste better unpeeled. I put them

on to cook, and the next ten minutes were a mad turmoil as everything decided to finish cooking itself at once. I rushed about, snatching things away here and there as they were about to burn. I turned the oven down, and put everything inside to keep warm, and stood back wiping the sweat off my brow and feeling rather pleased with myself. Even the savoury was ready – it would be pretty dried up by the time it appeared, but it was a load off my mind.

I only just got this done before the hired waitresses came in with trays and said that the guests were there and they wanted to serve dinner. I got it away all right as far as the fish, forgetting to put the sherry in the soup, but I was past bothering about trifles like that. I was carefully carving the pheasants, calculating that it would take them a little time to drink their soup and toy with their fish while conversing elegantly of this and that. However, they evidently had nothing to say to each other and were concentrating on quick eating, because the waitresses came back for the pheasants long before they were ready. In a frenzy, I tore the wretched birds limb from limb with my bare hands, and scattered mushrooms over the ragged pieces as best I could. Nannie had arrived in the kitchen at this point and was observing my distress with the utmost satisfaction. She kept either sniffing or clicking her teeth, whichever it was it was maddening, and I said:

‘Would you mind taking the vegetables out of the oven?’

She shuffled off to get a cloth, and took care not to return till I’d done it myself. Black despair settled on me and I could have cried with exhaustion and hatred of everybody in this horrible house. I remembered to make the coffee. Luckily Nannie didn’t see it boil up all over the stove. Things were a little calmer now, except that dirty dishes kept on arriving in astonishing numbers and being piled up wherever there was an inch of space. The sad maid – her name was Addie – I discovered, and the two waitresses were behaving like people acting in a play. They would sweep into the kitchen as if coming off the stage into the wings, with trays held high and a tense expression of

hauteur still on their faces, relax for a moment in the frenzy of getting the new dishes loaded, and glide off again with faces prepared to make their next entrance. The nurse and I were left like stage hands among the debris, as if having seen a glimpse of another world; we almost listened for the applause of the unseen audience.

The washing up took an age. I began to regret the days when a huge dish was put on the middle of the table and everyone helped themselves with their fingers. It was finished at last, and we all sat down in the sitting-room round the unappetizing remains of the feast, 'hotted up' by me. I was too tired to do more than drink a cup of tea. They regarded me with pity, and Nannie said, 'Slimmin', I suppose - mad I call it,' as she packed potato away behind her well-filled black alpaca. Addie ate rapaciously and I wondered at her thinness. I was enlightened, however, when her apology for passing her plate for a third helping was: 'It's me little strangers, there's no satisfyin' 'em, it seems.'

This led to other interesting topics. Nannie's feet, it appeared, were inclined to 'draw' in the damp, and Violet, one of the waitresses, had some information on the subject of varicose veins. The other waitress, whose name sounded like Mrs Haddock, had a daughter who had just had a bad time with her first, so, not to be outdone, I told them about my dropped arches. This went down well, and I went up a bit in their estimation. Cigarettes were lit, and we settled down to a cosy discussion of the people upstairs.

'Some people', said Addie in her rather moaning voice, 'have got a nerve. That Mrs Bewmont, I mean to say, asked for a second sponge finger, straight she did. "Well," I said to myself, "what cheek, eh?"'

'Well I never. *She* never took one.'

'Didn't she then? Too busy talking to his Lordship, I dessay. "Go it, my lady," I says to myself, "we seen you without your party manners."'

'What about Miss May? She got married, didn't she? Isn't she going to have a baby yet?'

'No, dear – she can't, I've heard. It's 'is fault, they say, but of course –'

I was beginning to feel a trifle uncomfortable, and was relieved when, at this point, the drawing-room bell broke into Addie's revelations.

'Oh, bells, bells, bells, they'd drive you mad,' said Violet calmly as she rose without haste to answer the summons. I thought it was about time I was going, so I went and put my coat on. I wanted to know what time I had to come the next day, and nothing had as yet been settled about my wages.

Violet came downstairs again and said: '*She* wants to see you before you go.'

'She' was in the hall, her plumage drooping a little from the strain of sociability. 'Ah, Miss Dickens!' I could see she was trying to carry something off, as her voice was higher than ever, and falsely bright. 'I really don't think I can settle anything permanent just now, so please don't bother to come tomorrow. Thank you *so* much. *Good* night!' She pressed some coins into my hand and vanished into the drawing-room. When the door had shut behind her on the swell of voices, I opened my hand on two half-crowns and a shilling.

'Well,' I said to myself, as I banged out into the Dulwich night and nearly fell into the laurels, 'what a cheek, eh?'



## *Chapter Two*

I THINK Miss Cattermole must have refrained from telling the agency what she thought of me, for they rang me up a few days later and offered me another job. This time it was a Mrs Robertson, who wanted someone twice a week to do washing and ironing and odd jobs. As I had already assured the agency that I was thoroughly domesticated in every way, I didn't feel like admitting that I was the world's worst ironer.

They gave me the address, and I went along there in a clean starched apron which I hoped made me look crisp and efficient. The porter of the flats let me in, as Mrs Robertson was out, but she had left a note for me, and a pile of washing on the bathroom floor. I sorted it out, and it was not attractive. It consisted mainly of several grubby and rather ragged pairs of corsets and a great many small pairs of men's socks and stockings in a horrid condition of stickiness.

I made a huge bowl of soapsuds, and dropped the more nauseating articles in with my eyes shut. I washed and rinsed and squeezed for about an hour and a half. There was no one but me to answer the telephone, which always rang when I was covered in soap to the elbow. I accepted a bridge party for the owner of the corsets, and a day's golfing for the wearer of the socks, but did not feel in a position to give an opinion on the state of cousin Mary's health.

I had just finished hanging out the clothes, and had wandered into the drawing-room to see what sort of books they had, when I heard a latch key in the door. I flew back to the bathroom, and was discovered diligently tweaking out the fingers of gloves when Mrs Robertson walked in. It had occurred to me that she must be a very trusting person to allow a complete stranger the run of her flat, and I now realized that it was probably because she was the soul of



honesty herself, that she expected everyone else to be the same. Her large blue eyes gazed candidly on the world, from a face that shone with integrity. She gave me a hearty smile and a handshake, and looked round to inspect my labours. If she expected everyone to be honest, she also expected them to be as efficient as herself. She was horrified to see that I had not hung the stockings up by the heels, and told me so with a charming frankness. However, she still wanted me to come back the next day to iron the things I had washed, so my heart warmed towards her, and I offered to make her a cup of tea. Mr Robertson arrived just as I was going out, and we collided at the front door. He threw me a terrific glance upwards, for he was a fiery man, and scuttled for safety into his dressing-room.

I returned the next day, still crisp and efficient, and scorched Mrs Robertson's best *crêpe de Chine* camisole. She was more than frank in her annoyance over this trifling mishap and it made me nervous. The climax came when I dropped the electric iron on the floor and it gave off a terrific burst of blue sparks. I supposed it had fused, and Mrs Robertson came hurrying in at the sound of the crash, and she knew it had. It was all very awkward, and I felt very small indeed under her candid remarks. It ended by her paying me at the rate of a shilling an hour for the time I had put in, and a tacit agreement being formed between us that I should never appear again. I just caught a glimpse of Mr Robertson flitting into a doorway as I came into the hall. I was sorry not to have known him better, we could have been friends, I think – except for the sticky socks.

\*

Well, so far I didn't seem to have been much of a success as a working girl. I wasn't exactly piling up money in large quantities either, and the rate of pay didn't come anywhere near compensating for the mental agonies that I had undergone. I was still undaunted, however, and told myself that there are so many people in the world that it doesn't matter if one doesn't hit it off with one or two of them. I