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## THE FROCKS

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**M**ost women's clothes at that time were designed to make the wearers look svelte: edge-to-edge seams, narrow reverses, slim skirts with a kick pleat at the back. Surplus decoration was rigorously censored. It was a couture which was elegant and minimalist, and it spoke of ladylike good taste. But it made Amy discontented. She worked as a junior at one of the minor fashion houses. She was slim enough to fit into the clothes she made, but they did not speak to her or make her glad. There they lay on the cutting-tables: bales of sober tweed, swatches of matte satin, serried rows of bone buttons. Amy wanted to make something that was not allowed, and so night after night, she stayed behind in the basement. She thought that this might be the engine-room of her imagination. And she was right.

Every night, in the fashion-house area in Riding House Street where she worked, the workers would throw out unwanted bits of fabric. There they lay outside each shop. Not for nothing was it called "the rag trade". Amy flitted from one doorway to another, picking up bits of satin and lace, and hid them in boxes. At weekends she scoured the markets for deckchair



fabric, coloured gauze, stripes, woven nosegays and circles. Soon she had enough to begin.

She laid the fabrics out on one of the cutting-room tables and was astonished to find how easy her task was. She tried a dress first, and it almost seemed to *make itself*. The dress had colossal sleeves, and she decided to slash these and insert a vivid purple satin interior so that it looked like an Elizabethan doublet. The waist was tight, and the bodice was so low-cut that her nipples almost peeped out. And the skirt! It was huge, and she felt moved to add layer upon layer of tulle and net. Of course, it was not exactly easy to wear and it was hardly inconspicuous. Her boyfriend came to see it, and remarked “do you really think you’re going out in *that?*” But she did, and she got stuck in a phone box and had to be pulled out by a pair of passing policemen.

She noticed that when she wore the dress, people would titter and mutter to each other. But she despised those who listened to the conversations of others. Valiantly, she expanded her repertoire: trousers made of sailcloth, so hard that it was impossible to sit down in them, and jackets made out of 57 varieties of cloth. The hems and darts were marked out with contrasting threads. Amy was a walking revolution.



Soon she attracted media attention, and a sponsor who paid for her to have her own workroom.

She had arrived: but where, exactly? The frocks she made were outrageously, mellifluously feminine. The layers, the peplums, the frills were dizzyingly excessive in a way that appealed to those who had unacknowledged hungers. People literally fought to acquire an original by Brand Amy, and there were several small riots outside the shops which sold her wares. But then things took a very peculiar turn.

One day, the door to one of the outlet shops sprang open, and a client stood there screaming: "get this bloody thing off me!" She was wearing one of the huge frocks, and looked like a tiny caterpillar in the middle of an enormous cabbage. It could not be taken off. The hooks and eyes were somehow welded together, and the built-in corset had invaded the client's ribcage, and became part of it. They called the fire brigade at first, and they tried, with electric saws and block-and-tackle, to wrest the dress from her body. But to no avail. In the end surgery was necessary, and scalpels were required to rebuild the wearer's body.



Things got worse. A phenomenon developed called “the Amy click”. Only some frocks exhibited it. Once they were tried on in the shop, and the breasts had been pushed up, the hips smoothed down and the frills fluffed up, there was a loud click as the dress enclosed the wearer for good. Some women lived and died in their frocks, others had them cut away. But no one failed to notice that the discarded ruffles and pleats seemed to have a life of their own. The frocks would lay there in the corner of the room, moaning a little and trying to crawl across the floor. Amy often visited the discarded dresses, when she was alerted to them: what were they, her tricky darlings, and why did they sometimes kill and sometimes cure? The only answer they gave was a rustle and a sigh. Nonetheless, she took care to sit well away from them. They might devour their mother.

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