

THE CAMEL'S BACK

By CHRISTOPHER OWEN

Stephanie Tennant stood in Selfridges among the rails of trousers and blouses in white and orange and yellow, and impossible jackets in yellow, black and red. She walked through to the cosmetics department, stumbled and almost fell. As she did so, a sales assistant, seizing the opportunity, took a step towards her and held out a small bottle of fragrance for her approval as a purchaser. It was all money now, money and greed and disloyalty. She stood, marooned beneath the glittering hanging lights, all about her the bright clean-cut modern decor and the heavy clamour of scents and perfumes. A Japanese girl said: "Would madam like me to make-up your face? We are doing a special January promotion."

Stephanie had never been late for work before. She had made the same journey every working day for nine years, taking the 8.04 train from Barnes Station to Waterloo, then by Tube on the Northern Line to Tottenham Court Road Station, from where she had walked the short distance to her second floor offices in Oxford Street. This morning her

employees at Argus Secretarial Script Services would be surprised when they saw her. There were three of them. The ever-reliable Nita, pregnant Pam, and Mel, the breath of fresh air, the life and soul of the party.

"Pluck my eyebrows," Stephanie told the girl. "Get rid of them," she said. She rummaged in her bag for her cigarettes, then, remembering that smoking was not permitted, she put them back. Her bag was always tidy. Mel's, on the other hand, was a mess. Stephanie had seen her trying to find a lost earring, pulling everything out onto her desk: old tissues, loose change, tampax, brushes, mascara, lipsticks, sellotape, door-keys, half empty bottles of Evian. That had been the Friday before Christmas.

Stephanie's husband, Michael, came in Fridays, in the afternoons, to do the books. Michael was an accountant. Whenever he called in, he would always talk to the girls. He knew Stephanie disapproved. Aware of her standing in the doorway of her small side office, he would grind his teeth, and his small fists would clench and unclench.

"I mustn't keep you from your duties, ladies," he would say cheerily.

He'd walk to the door, stop by Mel's desk, tap his pipe on the heel of his right

shoe, and knock the burnt acrid tobacco into her yellow waste-paper bin.

"Oh thanks!" Mel would exclaim in mock delight.

"You never do that in my waste-paper bin!" Nita and Pam would protest.

It had become the office joke. A ritual.

The Japanese girl held up a mirror.

"More red," Stephanie ordered, "More black round the eyes," she said.

Some weeks before Christmas, the lease had come up for renewal, the landlords had doubled the rent, and Stephanie found herself standing at the window in her small private office, looking down into Oxford Street at the Americans, the Japanese, the Arabs, Nigerians, the procession of Hari Krishnas with their bells and drums and chanting, their shaven heads, their lunatic appearance. She had watched and listened to the traffic. Everyone on the move, going places. She noted the buses, the number 10 to and from Hammersmith, the number 25 back and forth from Ilford, the 73 out to Tottenham and the 309 to Archway and Kings Cross. For all of nine years, Argus had been her centre, the street itself her perimeter.

"You like to buy the face cream?" the assistant asked, "You like to buy the

eye shadow, the blush, the lipstick?" These were cut-throat days. Honour was a thing of the past. The girl wrapped each item individually and placed each in a fancy white box and tied each box at the top with a pink ribbon. She put the boxes into a white and pink plastic carrier bag. She handed the bag to Stephanie, and Stephanie took it away with her.

"Close crop it," Stephanie told the hairdresser in Henrietta Place.

"Short," she snapped. "Then dye it red," she told him. The hairdresser lifted her hair and let it fall. This was the hair that Michael on New Year's Eve had nearly torn out by its roots. He had pulled her head down level with his own and punched her in the face.

"You want to make me unhappy?" she had asked him.

"I do!" he had solemnly cried as he had kicked her into the bedroom, where he had later left her curled up in a corner, with the man next door banging on the wall. Before they had been married, Michael had had roses and champagne delivered. He had set her on a pedestal, and had shown her off to his friends and colleagues. Poor bloody infertile Stephanie was to fail him, after which the beatings began. She told him she wanted a divorce, and he

had come up with the Argus idea. It had been a peace offering. The business would belong to her. He would finance it. After all, he knew about finance.

She stood on the corner of Holles Street, her face, her hair transformed, waving at taxis that wouldn't stop. She placed on the pavement beside her the pink and white carrier bag containing the cosmetics. The girls would be wondering where she'd got to. She was going to deliver a bombshell that morning. She would stun them into silence by her announcement that Argus was closing. She was going to give them goodbye presents. She'd already bought them. There was a watch for Nita, for she had broken hers. There were baby clothes for Pam. There was a small red box in the shape of a heart for Mel, in which there was an earring which Mel had been complaining of having lost, and which Stephanie had found on the afternoon of New Year's Eve in Michael's trouser pocket.

A taxi pulled over to the kerb where she stood. The cabby looked out at her.

Then, almost immediately, he drove on.

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