My name is Verity Sparks, and I’ve got itchy fingers. The Professor calls it teleagтивism. Sounds like a disease, doesn’t it? But it’s not. It’s more like a talent. A gift. I’ve always had it, but I didn’t know I had it until the 18th May 1878. I’ll never forget that date. It was the day I finished the yellow hat.

The hat was mostly feathers, with one poor little bird left whole and stuck onto the brim.

“Like a dead duck on a plate, ain’t it?” I said as I held it up.

Madame sighed. “Yes, it is. But it’s what she asked for. Oh, dear!” She fussed around on the workbench for a few seconds, and then sighed again. “My spectacles, dear – have you seen my spectacles?”
I whisked them out from under a bundle of ribbons.

“And my scissors?”

I found them too, and handed them to her with a yawn. It was half after eight on a Saturday morning, and Madame and I had been working by lamplight since a bit after five. Madame was my employer. The gold letters on the shop window said:

_Madame Louisette_

_Boutique de Modiste à la Mode_

That’s “fashionable hat shop” in French, but to tell the truth, Madame was about as French as a Chelsea bun. Her real name was Louisa Splatt.

“But I couldn’t call the shop ‘Splatt’s Hats’, now, could I?” she told me when I first started with her. “It just don’t have no chic.”

Madame had four of us apprentices living in. Emily and Maria were sixteen, and Beth, my special friend, was thirteen like me. We got a wage besides our board and lodging, and though she had a way of boiling all the taste out, Cook gave us big helpings, and she didn’t mind us girls having the odd bit of bread and cheese when we got hungry. Most days we worked only ten hours, with Sundays off and a
half-day holiday every month. Madame was a kind employer, and so we counted ourselves lucky.

The other girls were working quietly, cutting and stitching silk linings, and Miss Charlotte, our saleslady (Madame called her the *vendeuse*) was downstairs arranging a new window display in the shop.

“I’d be lost without you, dear,” said Madame.

“Well, your scissors and your specs would be,” I said. “Now, into the hatbox?”

Madame sighed yet again. “How many hats has Lady Throttle had so far?”

“She took two with her on her first visit and one last week. This is the fourth.” I crumpled tissue paper and packed it around the bonnet.

“She hasn’t paid me a penny. That bird came from South America, ordered in special. And I owe the wholesaler … where’s the bill, dear?”

“Here.”

Madame looked at the bill and her saggy old face sagged even more. “Oh my gawd! How am I going to pay that?”

Hats weren’t an easy business. Madame had to pay the factory in Southwark for the hat forms, and the wholesalers for trimmings and silks, and then
there was wages, rent, food and coal.

“It’ll turn out all right, you’ll see.” I gave her a brief hug. “Lady Throttle wanted the hat before ten o’clock. Shall I go now, Madame?”

“Yes, dear. Her address is …” Madame peered at her own scrawl in the order book, “… Number three, Collingsby Square. Do you know where that is?”

“Yes, I do.” I’d been running messages and making deliveries for so long it seemed like I had a map of London inside my head.

“Well, off you go.” Madame gave me an absent-minded smile and then began patting at her face in mild panic. “Where’s my specs? I’ve lost them again!”

“They’re on the table, Madame.”

“So they are. Bless you, dear.”

I was halfway down the narrow stairs when I heard a call.

“Verity! Are you there?” It was Miss Charlotte. It was funny, but it almost seemed like she’d been waiting for me. “Did Madame give you money for your fare?”

“No, Miss Charlotte. It’s only twenty minutes’ walk.”
“But it might rain, and the hatbox will get wet. You had better catch the omnibus.”

It wasn’t like Miss Charlotte to be so thoughtful, and I must have glanced at her curiously, for she continued, “I’m sure Madame would wish it. Those hatboxes cost a pretty penny, you know.” She handed me sixpence. “Bring back the change, won’t you?”

“Yes, Miss Charlotte.” I went to put the coin in my pocket but she stopped me.

“You’ll lose it like that. Here.” As she handed me a little drawstring purse made from red silk brocade, she suddenly gave a big smile. If I hadn’t known better, I’d have said she liked me. “I made it myself. You may have it to keep.”

“Why thank you, Miss Charlotte,” I said, but I was puzzled. A present from Miss Charlotte? She was usually as sour as vinegar with us young ones.

“Off you go then!” she snapped. That was more like her.

Fashionable ladies don’t get out of bed till after ten, so the streets near Madame’s were quiet and I could glance into the shop windows as I hurried along. Not for the likes of me, of course, but a cat...
can look at a king, and I looked at lace and fine linen handkerchiefs, perfumes and French soaps, umbrellas and parasols and leather travelling cases. In the jeweller’s shop, a pair of white-gloved hands were reaching through the curtains with a velvet tray of rings and gold chains. The florist was taking delivery of roses and violets with the dew still on them, and in the confectioner’s (this was the one I liked the best) the shopgirls were piling boxes of toffees, jujubes and bonbons on the counter. One of them smiled at me and gave a friendly wave. I waved back. After a morning hunched over in the workroom, it felt good be to be out and about. The omnibus, a double-decker carriage pulled by ten horses, rumbled past, but I didn’t bother trying to catch it. Miss Charlotte was wrong about the weather. It was a perfect day.

Lady Throttle’s house wasn’t hard to find. It was in a quiet street lined with trees, smack-bang in the middle of a row of tall white buildings with lots of columns and arches and fancy iron railings. I went down the narrow steps to the tradesman’s entrance and rang the bell. I rang again. And again. I hesitated a bit, but time was getting on, and Lady
Throttle had been most particular about the time. She wanted to show her new hat to Sir Bertram before he left for the city at ten.

“Ruddy hell,” I said to myself (pardon the language). “Here goes!” And I ran up to the front door and lifted the knocker. It was loud enough to wake the dead, and seconds later a uniformed maid no older than me opened the door. She took one glance and decided she needn’t waste her manners.

“What?”

“A hat from Madame Louisette for Lady Throttle,” I said. I peered past her into the entrance hall. It was all white marble and gilt mirrors and shiny furniture.

“So you’ve come to the front, have you?” She put her hands on her hips. “The tradesman’s entrance not good enough for you?”

“I rang and no one came.”

“As if I haven’t got enough to do, but I have to jump up and come the very second some—”

“Violet! That’s enough!” A tall woman dressed in plain black came briskly down the stairs, and Violet just melted away.

“I am Crewel, Lady Throttle’s personal maid.” She beckoned with one long bony finger. “Come
with me. No, not up there!” She waved me away from the marble staircase. “We will use the service stairs.”

The service stairs were for the servants. They were dark, narrow and steep, covered with threadbare carpet. The usual, I thought. Good enough for the maids, even though they might catch their heels and break their bloomin’ necks falling downstairs. But when I followed Crewel into Lady Throttle’s dressing room, I was surprised to see worn carpet there too, and faded curtains. A bit shabby, really, for all it was so flash in the hallway.

“Sit there.” Crewel pointed to a stool in the corner, and then she turned to the lady sitting at the dressing table. “The girl’s here with your hat, m’lady.”

Lady Throttle ignored me, and that way I got a good look at her. She was very small and pretty, with black hair, white skin and bright blue eyes. She was posed in front of her mirror like a fashion plate in one of those magazines Madame got sent from Paris. Showing off her dress, I thought – and there was a lot to show. It was red, ruffled and flounced and I guessed there was close to ten yards
of silk braid on her bustle. A bit too smart for a hat delivery on a quiet morning in her own house.

After a while she spoke, but not to me. “Crewel,” she said, in a slow, drawling voice. “Give Bertie this,” and she held out a folded piece of notepaper.

I sat and waited with the hatbox on the floor beside me while Crewel left the room for a bit. Humming a little tune, Lady Throttle patted her cheeks, licked her lips and smoothed her hair, and then she just sat looking at herself in the mirror until Crewel came back. She was followed by a tall, fat old gent. Was this Sir Bertram, Lady Throttle’s husband? I stood up and bobbed a curtsey, but he too ignored me.

“Dear, dear Bertie,” said Lady Throttle in a caressing voice, standing on tiptoe to kiss him.

He smiled and pinched her cheek. “Here we are then, puss,” he said, taking a small blue velvet case from his breast pocket. She held out her hand.

“No, no,” he said “Let me!” He took something glittering out of the case and pinned it to her dress.

“I shall wear it tonight, Bertie. Will you be proud of me?” she asked. He gave a long, happy sigh by way of reply, and then turned to leave.

“Wait, Bertie! Won’t you look at my new hat?”
“Of course, my love.”
Crewel clicked her fingers, and I brought the hatbox forward.

Lady Throttle took the hat out and settled it on her curls. “Isn’t it lovely?” she asked, but instead of agreeing, Sir Bertram clutched his throat. His face went purple and his moustache began to quiver. I thought his eyes were going to pop right out of his head.

“Put it back,” he gasped.

“What’s the matter, Bertie dear?”

“Feathers!” He held his nose with one hand and waved the other around helplessly. “Feathers! Allergic!” he wheezed, and staggered out of the room.

“Well, well, well!” Lady Throttle took off the hat and let it drop to the floor. “So I shan’t have my yellow bonnet after all.” She gave a little laugh, and then turned to me. “Come here, girl. What is your name?”

“Verity Sparks, ma’am.”

She looked me up and down, and smiled. I didn’t quite like that smile.

“You’ll have to take this hat back, and get me another one instead.”

“There’s nothing else in yellow at the moment,
ma’am—” I began, but she cut me off short.

“Who said yellow? Something white, I think ... red and white, to suit my new afternoon costume. Something that will set off the brooch. See?” She unpinned it from her dress and held it out in her hand. “This is the famous Throttle diamond. Bertie’s great-grandfather took it.”

Did she mean he’d stolen it? I didn’t know what to say, so I said nothing.

“He took it from the eye of an Indian idol. Just snatched it out and rode off with it. How cross all those natives must have been!”

More than cross, I thought.

“It’s worth thousands of pounds,” she continued dreamily. “Isn’t it beautiful?”

Beautiful? I hadn’t seen too many diamonds, not up close anyway. “It’s very sparkly, ma’am,” was the best I could do.

“Those stones around the edge are rubies. See how they twinkle!”

“Yes, ma’am.” Sparkly and twinkly was all very well, but my business was bonnets. “Madame Louisette has something in ruby satin, ma’am,” I said. “With white silk ribbons.”

“That will do.” She put the brooch down on
her dressing table, and stood up. “Bring it back this afternoon. At three o’clock.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

I was surprised. Lady Throttle had made such a fuss about the feathered hat – she’d been fussy about everything she’d ordered – and here she was leaving the choice to me. Still, she was paying the bill. Or would soon, I hoped, for Madame’s sake. I turned to go.

“Come back, Verity.”

I did as I was told.

“Hold out your hand and shut your eyes.”

What’s this? I thought, but I obeyed.

She moved towards me and stood so close I smelled her perfume. Lily of the valley, it was.

“Hand me my purse, Crewel.”

I heard Crewel’s skirts rustle, and she brushed against me, and then Lady Throttle pressed something into my palm. “There,” she said. “For your trouble.”

I opened my eyes. It was a chocolate.

“Thank you ma’am.” I said, and curtseyed.

I don’t like chocolate.

The bell jangled as I opened the door to the shop.
Miss Charlotte frowned slightly, but she didn’t stop talking.

“The blue bonnet is charming, ma’am,” she purred. “But I feel that you are one of the few ladies who could do justice to this more unusual shade.”

Unusual shade! It was like mouldy cheese. A customer had ordered it to her own design and then returned it. Madame had promised Charlotte a bonus if she could flog it off to someone else.

Which she did. I waited while Miss Charlotte wrote out the bill with a smile just like the cat that got the cream. She looked up when I put Lady Throttle’s hatbox on the counter.

“What’s this?” She pointed to a dirty streak on the pink-and-white paper.

“Mud, Miss Charlotte. I had to walk back. The omnibuses was full up.”

“You should have taken more care, Verity.”

“Sorry, Miss Charlotte. Anyway, Lady Throttle doesn’t want it. All them feathers give Lord Bertram the sneezes.”

“Sir Bertram,” she corrected me. “He’s a baronet, not a lord.”

“Yes, Miss Charlotte. That red bonnet with the white ribbons, is it still here?”
She pointed to a hatbox on the shelf.
“Could I have it, please? It’s for—”
“Lady Throttle. I know.” She handed it down to me. “Next time,” she hissed. “Don’t come in through the shop. The customers don’t like it.”
“No, Miss Charlotte. I mean, yes, Miss—”
“You haven’t lost that purse?” she interrupted.
“No, I—”
“Go and have something to eat,” she said. Again the smile. “You can pick up the hatbox on your way out.”