

## IMAGINING

If J.R.R Tolkien had invited Marilyn Monroe to lunch at his Oxford College,

If John F Kennedy had met Casanova,

If Queen Victoria had met Jane Austen,

If Oscar Wilde had been analysed by Sigmund Freud,

If St Augustine had prayed with Tolstoy,

If Florence Nightingale had met Winston Churchill,

If Grace Kelly had kissed Karl Marx.... which is less unlikely than it sounds. Before she married Prince Rainier of Monaco Grace liked outraging her conservative father. A Jewish Communist lover would have infuriated him even more than all the actors she had bedded.

All the characters who meet in this book had egos which would dwarf an iceberg; humility was not their home turf. The details of the meetings are not totally fantastic, however. Readers will not find Tolkien, a respectably married don, suddenly turn into a lecher and try to grope Monroe under the High Table, muttering 'my precious'. Nor will they find Monroe, who was married to Joe Di Maggio, the great baseball player, discussing whether the Australians were likely to win the next Test match at Lords.

There are instances of imaginary meetings in books but no book has been devoted to imaginary meetings between historical figures. Given how we are fascinated by the lives, successes and sins of great men and women that is strange.

So why did I start? I like to dip into a set of the philosophical journal, MIND, which my father gave me when I started to study philosophy. In the issue of April 1954, the Austrian born philosopher, Karl Popper invented a dialogue between Socrates and

less famous Theaetetus; they sparred about paradoxes. The queen of the paradoxes is;

Every Cretan is liar.

I am a Cretan.

So if every Cretan lies, and I, who say this am a Cretan, I must be lying about being a liar. So I must be telling the truth.

Or not.

Philosophers love such logical knots – and dialogues have been knitted and knotted on the nature of love, the nature of truth and the nature of philosophy. The most famous is Plato's *Symposium* which is a riff on the theme that human beings look for their 'missing half.' According to Greek myths, humans were originally created with four arms, four legs and a head with two faces. Zeus split them into two separate beings, condemning them to spend their lives looking for their other halves.

Then it wasn't love at first sight because they'd known each other all along. Plato explained: "when one of them meets the other half, the actual half of himself, whether he be a lover of youth or a lover of another sort, the pair are lost in an amazement of love and friendship and intimacy." People who have never read or heard of Plato talk of their husband or wife as 'my other half' or even 'my better half'.

Borges' *The Book of Imaginary Beasts* also made a huge impression on me in the 1970s. I am not sure if someone has written a thesis on the influence Borges had on Tolkien or Tolkien on Borges but if they haven't, they should. Some of Tolkien's monsters, like the orcs, owe much to Borges' mythological beasts. The first of these was Á Bao A Qu;

“A creature that lives on the staircase of the Tower of Victory in Chittor. It may only move when a traveller climbs the staircase, and it follows close at the person's heels. Its form becomes more complete the closer it gets to the terrace at the tower's top. It can only achieve this ultimate form if the traveller has obtained Nirvana; otherwise it finds itself unable to continue.”

Borges then went through the alphabet until he reached Zaratan;

“A sea creature of such immense size as to be confused for an island, attested to by sources in Anglo-Saxon, Irish, Persian, and Greek literature and folklore, among other cultures.”

In this short introduction, I do not intend to give away who meets whom, because this book is a game – a game I’m playing. It’s a conceit, and a confection but it’s a confection sweetened with some psychology.

Since the 1920s, psychologists have studied children who invent and play with imaginary friends. The mind miners debate whether children make up such friends because they are lonely or because they simply enjoy the making up. In 1993, I co-wrote *The Development of the Imagination* with the late Dr Stephen MacKeith who was chief psychiatrist to the British army at one time. He had studied children who created ‘imaginary worlds’. Some were very complex; one boy, for instance, drew plans for a railway which crossed the oceans and spanned the globe; another child invented a country and detailed its laws and history – with illustrations. So I have some form in this area; it is not such transwarp leap from imaginary worlds to imaginary meetings.

Some of the meetings could have taken place. PG Wodehouse could have met Samuel Beckett either during or after the 1945 war. Beckett was in the French resistance and Wodehouse was in le Touquet, until he agreed to go to Germany to make his ill judged broadcasts, which led many to denounce the man who had created Jeeves and Wooster as a traitor.

A meeting between Wodehouse and Beckett might have changed literary history, but not much else. If Nathan Rothschild and Napoleon had met, however, we might be living in a different world. Rothschild was financing the English army against Napoleon in the first decade of the 1800s. If Napoleon had managed to persuade him to stop bank rolling the Duke of Wellington, the battle of Waterloo might have had a different result. And Waterloo station would be in Paris, not London.

Some meetings involve characters from very different cultures. Miraculously all understand English and speak it with no accent – French, Lithuanians, Hungarians, Russians, Germans, Italians, even Tibetans.

I offer readers in the middle of the book a brief interlude of how fantasy literature developed from Beowulf on. As far as I can make out, no one mixed fantasy and fact by making real characters who could not have met meet. It is, one could say, fantastic that no one has yet imagined a book of imaginary meetings.

## DRESSING

Queen Victoria often retreated to Balmoral Castle in the Highlands when she was depressed after her beloved Prince Albert died in 1861. When he went to visit her there, her Prime Minister, Benjamin Disraeli, was shocked by her appearance. When he returned to London, he asked his wife for advice on what might cheer the Queen up. Mrs Disraeli pointed out that most unhappy women were cheered if they had a new frock, but it was unlikely the Queen would be ready to abandon her widow's weeds.

Nevertheless Disraeli felt it was an idea worth trying. He contacted his friend Rothschild who was in Paris as to might be both an imaginative dressmaker – Disraeli set much store by the imagination –and who also might be able to cope with the imperious temperament of the Queen.

A month later a young designer, who history would know as Coco Chanel, boarded the London to Aberdeen express at Kings Cross.

Chanel is met by the Queen's ghillie or servant. John Brown warns her that it was very likely Her Majesty will not receive her, as she prefers solitude and the company of trusted servants and her daughter Princess Beatrice. Brown is dressed, as usual, in a kilt.

"I had heard that men wear dresses in Scotland. That is very interesting," Chanel says.

"This is not a dress. It is a kilt," Brown gruffs.

A quilt, Chanel says. Being French, she is apt to mangle her English.

"No a kilt," Brown insists.

Coco asks him how the word is spelled and if he happens to know its origins.

Brown was interested in Scottish history. He offers her an account of the origins of the kilt in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. She asks if he would mind if she draws a picture of himself in his kilt.

“If it would help.”

“One is never sure what will help,” Chanel smiles.

Brown finds himself warming to this small woman. So when the Queen asks him what she is like, he replies; “Your Majesty, she seems intelligent, and willing to learn.”

“So you think I should receive her.”

“I see no harm in it, Your Majesty.”

The Queen tells Brown to lodge Chanel in the senior servants’ quarters and that she will see her the next day after breakfast. It would be rude to Mr Disraeli to send her away without giving her a brief audience.

Since the history of the kilt influenced what was to happen, it should be noted that Brown had explained to Chanel that in the late 17th or early 18th century the filibeg, or small kilt made of a single width of cloth hanging down below had become popular in the Highlands. A letter published in the *Edinburgh Magazine* in March 1785 argued the kilt was invented around the 1720s by Thomas Rawlinson, a Quaker from Lancashir who had a problem. The Highlanders in his charcoal making factory could not cut trees efficiently while they wore the usual "belted plaid", a large cloak which made swinging an axe tricky. Rawlinson asked a tailor to make it more practical. The tailor cut the belted plaid in two. Rawlinson was impressed and took to wearing the short kilt himself. It quickly became popular, first with Highland regiments and then with all Scots.

After leaving the Queen, Brown decides it would be more fitting to lodge Mme Chanel in one of the bedrooms in the East Wing. He imagines she will not want to eat with the servants so he arranges for dinner to be served to her in her rooms.

The next morning at ten, Brown knocks on Chanel’s door.

“Her Majesty will see you now,” he says. He walks her through the many passages of Balmoral to the Queen’s drawing room.

As they reach the double doors, Brown pauses. "I hope you will not mind me reminding you of the etiquette. You curtsy to the Queen and you do not speak till you are spoken to," he said. He opens the door and announces Chanel.

The Queen does not move, does not seem to notice her.

Chanel is not used to being ignored. She coughs and then curtsies.

"I have no wish to consult a dressmaker," the Queen says.

"You will forgive me observing, Your Majesty, but it is my job to observe. Obviously you have not seen a dressmaker for years."

"I am in mourning."

"It is more than ten years since your husband died."

"I think of poor Albert every day."

"I have some photographs of Prince Albert."

"I have no intention of discussing the Prince with you."

This does not deter Chanel who brings out six photographs of Albert which she had chosen carefully.

How dare you, thinks the Queen, but she is intrigued to see any photograph of her late husband. She cannot help sighing as she looks over them.

"Yes, he dressed well. The Prince seems to have had some sense of style. I have met the son of one of his old tutors, Mr Quetletet, who said his father, though he was an astronomer, did not have his head in the clouds and was meticulous in his dress."

"Albert often spoke of his tutor. I did not know Mr Quetletet had a son."

"Yes but he disappointed his father."

"Our eldest son disappointed Albert – and me. He disappoints me still."

The Queen immediately regrets having betrayed such a confidence to a servant who is not even one of her own servants.

Chanel feels her unease but clients often get anxious. She usually makes sure she has some desert wine to soothe them – Chateau d’Yquem for the best ones but a decent Beaume de Venise for the others. She asks the Queen. “Did the Prince like you to dress fashionably?”

“I see no reason to tell you what my husband thought.”

“In which case, your Majesty, I shall leave.”

Chanel gathers the photographs and makes for the door.

“I did not give you permission to leave.”

“I have come to help, Your Majesty. I cannot help if you do not let me. What would your husband, whose tutor Mr Quetletet encouraged him to dress with style, think of you burying yourself in this black dress which looks so much like a balloon.”

In fact, Chanel had never met the son of Quetletet but she had learned early in her career that dressmakers often have to lie.

“You are very rude, young woman,” the Queen says.

“Dressmakers often have to be – even to great women.”

“I am not a great woman, I just happen to be Queen of England.”

“Mr Disraeli thinks you are a great woman.”

The Queen relents and points to one of the chairs. “You may sit down.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty.” Chanel sits opposite the Queen.

“May I ask what I know may seem a very personal question. How did Prince Albert like you to wear your hair?”

“That is a very personal question.”

“Your Majesty, I am only here because Mr Disraeli believes your people need to see you more and that you need to present a less bleak appearance in order to make the



monarchy safe. There have been revolutions in many countries in Europe. A queen must be seen.”

“And he thinks that if I dress differently it will make the monarchy safe.”

“I don’t presume to know what Mr Disraeli thinks.”

“You presume many other things. You will wait here.”

Victoria leaves the room. She had come to like, and trust, Disraeli more than any other politician. She did not know that Disraeli had written that when one had to flatter royalty, it was wise to lay it on with a trowel. She wants to make sure he had indeed had the idea of sending Chanel. She dispatches a telegram to her Prime Minister and waits for a reply. It comes within 30 minutes. Disraeli tells her that Rothschild, to whom England owed much, had recommended Chanel. Of course, Disraeli was just the Prime Minister and would never dream of telling the Queen what she should do, but he thought Her Majesty might be interested in Chanel’s ideas.

The Queen returns. Chanel curtsies to her again.

“Mr Disraeli thinks you may have ideas I should hear,” the Queen says.

There is a pause. Chanel finally decides to speak. “Let me begin, Madame, by asking you about the scent you wear.”

“It is attar de rose. And you address me as Your Majesty.”

“Your Majesty, you wear it on your hands too.”

“Yes.”

“Would you humour me by smelling this?”

Chanel holds out a small bottle, takes out the stopper and offers it to the Queen. The Queen does not take the bottle.

“What is it?”

“I call it Chanel No 1.”

Victoria does not know why but her hands reaches out for the bottle and smells the perfume. "It does smell quite nice but Prince Albert never smelled it."

"Humour me, your Majesty, by putting a little on the back of your ear."

"The Queen of England does not even humour her Prime Ministers."

"No one will know but you and I."

The Queen sighs. "You are very persistent." But, very delicately, she dabs some on the back of her ear. It is surprisingly soothing.

"Imagine that Prince Albert could enjoy it."

To Chanel's amazement, the Queen starts to cry. She collects herself, gets up and leaves the room not giving Chanel the time to curtsy even. In the grand corridor outside the drawing room, Brown is waiting.

"Your Majesty," he bows. "Do you need something?"

"No."

"There is something different about you if I may say so."

"You may not, Brown."

"In which case, there is nothing different about Your Majesty," Brown smiles. He is used to her whims.

"You are humouring me, Brown."

"I would not presume," he says, but he smiles.

Victoria walks back into the room where Chanel is waiting for her, as if she knew the Queen would return soon.

"You are still here," the Queen observes.

"I will leave the moment your Majesty tells me to."

"What does your little game prove?"

“It is not my aim to prove anything, Your Majesty.”

“I do not believe you.”

They stare in silence at each other. Chanel wonders if she dares flout etiquette. The Queen has not spoken to her but, often, women retreat into silence when they are unsure. And many were anxious when she dressed and undressed them as she saw them at their most vulnerable.

Finally Chanel says; “I am sure the Prince liked your hair. I have seen pictures of you when you wore it so that its full glory could be seen.”

“That was before I was a widow.”

“Can I persuade your Majesty to take off that widow’s cap?”

The Queen hesitates, sighs, and then starts to untie the strings that hold it on her head. “I am only doing this for Mr Disraeli. I have not even taken my cap off since Albert died.”

“So as Your Majesty has not removed her cap since he died, Her Majesty has not washed her hair for ten years.”

“You are a very irritating young woman. Very well. I do wash my hair and I take off my cap to do so. My governess instilled in me habits of hygiene. I have been brushing my teeth and washing my hair since I was two years old. ”

“I thought so,” Chanel allows herself a smile.

“How dare you,” the Queen says.

“Is it impertinent to suggest you are clean?”

“The Queen does not discuss such things.”

“All women discuss such things. Your hair is still fine. You wash your face too. That is obvious because your skin is still fresh.”

“What is the point of this degrading discussion?”

“I am sorry if I have offended you but I have learned Your Majesty that many women use clothes to make a point. Usually, it is to flatter men. That is not true in your case, of course, but you use clothes to make a point too.”

“I wear what is fitting for a widow in grief to wear”.

“I do not want to offend again but do you believe Prince Albert would want to see you like this?”

“If he were still alive, I would look very different.”

“How?”

“I would be happy – and happy women do not wear black. I even wore black when my daughter married a few months after her father died. But I allowed her to wear white.”

“I’m not a fool, your Majesty. I don’t expect you to look happy. But one can look less severe. Tomorrow we will attend to other parts of your costume.”

“This is not a costume,” the Queen snaps.

“Everything a woman wears is a costume. The question is; what does she want to say through her costume? A woman of your experience must know that.”

Chanel makes for the door.

“I didn’t say you could leave.”

“Mr Disraeli is expecting me to write to him.”

“You tell him what passes between us?”

“Certainly not. I never betray what my clients tell me. I am like a priest. May I leave now to collect my thoughts so I can write something which will say nothing but keep Mr Disraeli from asking you questions as I presume you communicate with him?”

The Queen waves her away. She adds; “Tell Brown not to knock for five minutes.”

Victoria needs five minutes to restore her sense of equilibrium and to tie her cap back on her head. When Brown knocks at the door, he finds her sitting at her desk, looking as severe as she normally does.

“Do you want me not to bring her to Your Majesty tomorrow?”

“I am not sure, Brown.”

“I think, if I may say, that you look different.”

“I am exactly the same, Brown.”

“As Your Majesty pleases,” he bows.

“Nothing pleases Her Majesty. You may go. And do not disturb me unless Mr Disraeli sends me a telegram.”

“Very good, ma’am.”

Once Brown has gone Victoria opens her diary which she writes every day. She describes, as is her habit, everything that has happened so she writes of her encounter with Chanel. She wrote 2000 words a day usually and liked to read what she had written before she closed her diary. When she did so, she realised that there was something about Chanel she almost admired – her refusal to be intimidated. Victoria knows exactly why she admires that. It reminds her of the way she had been before she became Queen.

The next morning when Brown comes to get Chanel, she asks him if he would mind carrying a large box and a tripod.

“The Queen does not like being photographed since the Prince died,” Brown warns.

Chanel says there were two other objects in her room she needs and asks whether Brown might get other servants to bring them.

“What are they?”

“A mannequin. And a suitcase.”

“I will bring them myself. The Queen will not want any of the lower servants to know you are showing her whatever you intend to show her.”

“Why do you think I mean to upset the Queen?”

He shrugs, a gesture he would never make before the Queen.

When they get to the door of the drawing room, Brown tells Chanel to wait. When he returns with the mannequin and the suitcase, he smiles; “Be gentle with her. She is still grieving.”

“I know that. But grief should not last forever.”

“She does not feel that.”

When the Queen tells them to enter the drawing room, she is astonished to see the suitcase, the mannequin, the tripod and the camera.

“You have brought enough to open a shop,” the Queen points out. “You may leave, Brown, but wait outside. I may need you to take Mlle Chanel to the railway station suddenly.”

“The horse and cart is waiting, Your Majesty.”

“You may go, Brown,” the Queen says. He bows and leaves. The Queen turns to Chanel.

“Before you sit down, I want to know what this is all for?”

“For you, Your Majesty. I just want you – please humour me – to play a game.”

Disraeli had told Chanel that the Queen did still like games.

“What do you have in that suitcase?”

“Two exact copies of the black balloon.”

“Why?”

“To help. A widow must wear black I agree but it need not be a black balloon.”

“Do all your clients suffer your insolence?”

“Your Majesty, many of them like it because it is not insolence but confidences women share when there are no men around.”

“I only shared confidences with my husband.”

“You must have been very happy.”

The Queen is not going to reply to that.

“May I, Your Majesty?”

The Queen shrugs. It struck Chanel that she shrugged just the way Mr Brown had done earlier. WHEREEEEE The Queen stares as Chanel unpacks the two replicas of her black dress and puts one of them on the mannequin.

“You agree this looks like your dress.”

“I do not see the point of this.”

“Your Majesty will very soon. I will remove certain parts of the dress on the mannequin. I shall begin with the right arm.”

With a deft cut Chanel snips some six inches off the right arm.

“You’ve ruined a perfectly good dress.”

“If you are not satisfied, Your Majesty, by the time I finish, I will make you five identical dresses at my own expense.”

The Queen, who is thrifty, is impressed by this offer.

“I will now cut the other arm,” Chanel says and exposes both arms of the mannequin bare to the elbows.

“That is utterly indecent,” the Queen splutters.

“In the privacy of this room with me, nothing is indecent. Will Your Majesty permit me to do the same on your person?”

“No person has seen my elbows for ten years.”

“A dressmaker is not a person, Your Majesty. I am a tool. Deferential, politic, glad to be of use as your Shakespeare says.”

“Who taught you that?”

“Mr Disraeli.”

“Did he know what you intended to do?”

“No. I tell men as little as possible. But he is a very gifted man.”

“Yes, he is.” She pauses. “You will tell him that the Queen humoured you.”

“If Your Majesty wants me to, of course.” .

“If he has instigated this game, I want him to know I did not refuse to play.”

Suddenly meek, Victoria stretches out her arms. Expertly, Chanel first cuts the right sleeve as she had done the dress on the mannequin. Then she cuts the left sleeve.

“No one has seen my elbows since my husband died.”

“I understand.”

“I am sure you don't. Have you lost a husband who made you happy?”

“No,” Chanel says.

“I cannot be seen like this.”

“That was why I brought a third dress so your Majesty can change into it when we have finished. No one will know what happened between us.”

To her surprise, Victoria begins crying.

“Your Majesty I did not mean to upset you.”

“I do not believe you. Leave me alone.”

When she had dressed herself back in the ballooning black dress, Victoria rings for John Brown.

“What has been going on here, Your Majesty?” He notices the black cloth on the carpet.

“Nothing, Brown.”

“Shall I send her away? She seems to have upset Your Majesty”.

“Nothing upsets me since Prince Albert died.”

“Of course not. May I ask, however, why you were crying?”

“I have never had to deal with anyone like her before. That is not quite true. I was bullied, of course, by my mother and her lover Sir John Conroy.”

“They plotted to control you and perhaps even to steal the Crown. I don't think this girl is doing that.”

“I did not ask for your opinion, Brown. Leave me alone.”

Discreetly Brown withdraws. Victoria waits a few minutes as he did sometimes reappear unexpectedly. Usually he knocks but today is a most unusual day. She does



not like that now although in her youth she enjoyed surprises because all her actions were controlled by her mother and Conroy. No one, not even her daughter Beatrice, knows Victoria has her ordinary diary and her most secret one. That diary is reserved for writing to Albert. She often asks him for advice but, as he is dead, she has to imagine what he would say in return.

An hour later, Brown knocks at the Queen's drawing room door.

"You may come in."

He brings her a number of letters including one from Disraeli.

"I can still drive her to the station."

"I don't want to upset Mr Disraeli."

"Of course not, ma'am."

"He seems to have great faith in her – and he is the Prime Minister."

Chanel spends some of the afternoon walking in the grounds, having told Brown where she can be found if the Queen summons her.

The next morning, at ten o'clock as usual, Brown knocks on Chanel's door.

"If I am to help her, I need the tools of my trade," she again asks Brown to carry the mannequin and the suitcase. He ushers her into the Queen's presence.

"I should like to continue, Your Majesty."

"Before I agree, I should like you to explain what you are doing."

"You have not sent me away."

"Only because I do not want to offend Mr Disraeli. I'm sure he has no idea what obscenities you are inflicting on me. I expect an answer."

"The truth?"

"The truth."

"I am not sure but I feel this is a good thing to try, Your Majesty."

"Why?"

"I have no simple answer. I rely on my intuition," Chanel smiles.

Victoria sighs and, to her surprise, again feels some sympathy for Chanel. She knows nothing of her life and of any struggles she might have had. Chanel, without knowing it, nearly ruins this moment of silent sympathy.

“I do not see why Your Majesty insists on your dress covering all of your legs,” Chanel says.

“Only Albert has seen my ankles. English women never show their ankles.”

“Not even when they give birth?”

“I wore socks, if you insist on knowing.”

Chanel laughs. “Your Majesty in the future women will not wear dresses which hide most of their ankles. They will look more like Mr Brown in his quilt.”

“Kilt is the word. A quilt is a kind of blanket.”

“Mr Brown has explained to me that the kilt is 200 years old. So Your Majesty should think of this as a kilt for women.”

“Only men wear kilts.”

“Fashions change. Today only men wear trousers. Who knows if that will always be so?”

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

“Humour me, Your Majesty, and let us see what a kilt might look like on a woman.”

“Thank goodness, no one can see me,” the Queen says. And realises that in saying that she has agreed to Chanel cutting the dress again.

Chanel takes her scissors to the dress hanging on the mannequin and makes a radical cut, removing a good ten inches of the legs.

“You are revealing even more than the ankle.”

“I did not want my effort to look half hearted which is never a good thing in a dress. Humour me again Your Majesty.”

“What am I expected to do now?”

Chanel takes her scissors in her hand. She comes close to the Queen. “This will not hurt.”

The Queen is silent as Chanel cut four inches off her dress.

“No respectable woman would be seen in such clothing. And it looks absurd.”

“I shall work on it during the day if your Majesty permits.”

“You will work on it, I suspect, even if I do not permit. Leave me now. And I ask you not to tell Mr Disraeli of this charade.”

“Of course, Your Majesty.” Chanel leaves the room after making a deep curtsy.

When Brown comes into the room some minutes later, he finds Victoria writing at her desk dressed as ever in her black balloon dress. The floor is littered with the black cloth Chanel had cut off. The Queen quickly closes the diary. She trusts Brown more than any of her servants but even he does not know the Queen often writes to Albert.

“Shall I take these scraps of cloth away Your Majesty,” Brown asks.

“Of course.”

Brown bends down and gathers up the cut black cloth.

“Aren’t you going to ask what she did?”

“Your Majesty will tell me if you want to.”

“I don’t.”

Brown always knew when to leave the Queen alone. He bows and closes the drawing room behind him.

In her room, Chanel feels a surge of energy. She cuts another six inches off the dress so that it just comes down to the knees. She alters the shoulders too so they have a much simpler line. She wonders if she dares show the Queen anything quite so daring.

That night the women both dream. Chanel’s dream is practical. She saw women march through Paris wearing a much shorter black dress. The Queen’s dream is more romantic; she dreams of her husband removing the dress. Though she had complained women should not be treated as breeding rabbits, she had always enjoyed making love to Albert. There was no one she could say that too so she

pours out her frustration in the most secret diary which contains many surprisingly erotic passages.

The next morning Chanel breathes deeply when she gets up. She does not eat any breakfast. When Brown comes to escort her, she is in a very good mood.

“Her Majesty may have had enough,” Brown says.

“I entertain her.”

“That is not what she says,” he says gruffly.

Chanel is careful not to show Brown the dress she has fashioned overnight. It comes to just above the knee. The shoulders are spare. Nothing could look less like a balloon.

As before, Brown leaves her alone with the Queen. When he has gone, Chanel says: “I do not want Your Majesty to be angry. I have been playing a game. It is what dressmakers sometimes do.”

Chanel opens the suitcase. “Please close your eyes.”

“You mean to surprise me,” says the Queen.

“I suppose so.” Chanel takes out the little black dress and puts it on the mannequin.

“Can I look now?” Victoria tries to keep the curiosity out of her voice. She opens her eyes and gasps.

“It just looks like a little black dress which shows far too much of a woman’s body. I suspect that if a woman wore that in the street my police would arrest her.”

“You don’t like it?”

“I hate it.”

“But let us imagine you were 25 years old.”

“I would never have worn it.”

“Would you have liked to have worn it, Your Majesty?”

A smile on Victoria’s lips. “I was bullied and controlled when I was a girl. I was never allowed to choose my own clothes.”

“No one will know if you try it on.”

“You will know.”

“A good dressmaker always forgets what her clients don’t want her to remember,”

Chanel smiles – and then remembers to add “Your Majesty.”

“Don’t tell me this is for me. It is for you for your vanity.”

“How am I vain?”

“You are trying to make me a different woman.”

“I am trying to show you that you could be different, Your Majesty.”

Victoria hesitates. She wants to call Brown and tell him to drive the girl to the railway station at once and, then, to call the Commissioner of Police and have her put on a boat for France.

“Give me the wretched dress, then,” Victoria says.

Victoria walks into the little room by the side of her drawing room. She is not used to undressing herself but she does so quickly. She slips the new dress on. There is no mirror in the room. As she is distracted, she does not notice that her knee length knickers protrude below the hem of the dress.

Chanel smiles when the Queen re-appears. “We need to hide what you English call your bloomers. That really will not do.”

The Queen cannot help but smile.

“If Your Majesty will allow.” Chanel takes her scissors and slices the knickers so they did not show below the knee. She takes a number of pins and hems the knickers up.

“It is just a little black dress,” the Queen observes, “half a decent dress.”

“It is the little black dress,” Chanel said. “Do you feel free?”

“I can’t expect you to know that a Queen is never free. And if I were seen wearing this my subjects would think I had gone mad.”

“But how do you feel?”

“I shall never tell you. If a Queen does not keep her secrets, she cannot rule.”

But then to Chanel's surprise, Victoria twirls around the room, something she had not done since Albert died in her arms.

"It is the future, Your Majesty."

"It is not my future."

Chanel knows better than to ask the Queen if she could take a photograph of her.

"Your Majesty looks free."

"Which, however, I am not."

But the Queen is smiling.