

At the turn of the century, if you wanted a ball gown, or an evening dress, then you headed for the ‘Shop Around the Corner’, literally around the corner from Balham Station, heading towards the Public Baths. Three times a year, the elderly seamstress who ran the shop would close for a week and when she re-opened, there in the window would be her latest creations, all stunningly designed and each had what she called her secret panel, which when asked what it was, she said was stitched to the inside of the dress with the finest strands of esparto rope to provide everlasting structure and shape. Those who doubted her and removed the panel on buying the dress, then found that the dress no longer fit them or did not hang the way it had been designed to – and the seamstress would then refuse to sell them any further dresses. Nobody thought to ask her how she knew that the original dress had been tampered with

At the end of the war, after running the shop on her own for over 40 years, she advertised for an assistant. Louise was the lucky girl. Each day she would be drawn into the seamstress’s inner world and shown how to stitch a tear so that you wouldn’t know it had ever been torn, how to hide a waistline so that it could be let out or taken in without the dress losing its balance. Louise soaked it in, waiting desperately for the day she would be given the secrets of the panel, and giving everything she had to gain the trust of the seamstress. Until the day in 1921 when she decided to take a day off. The seamstress was visiting a client the day before, knowing that the door to the shop, and sat at the worktop pondering. Then, with a deep breath she slowly and carefully laid out the dress, she peered at the panel and then as if in slow motion, began to unpick the first stitch. Nothing more than an overcast stitch on the inside as far as the eye could tell. And so, stitch after stitch until the whole panel had been removed. Louise held it in her hand and closely examined it. Nothing. Absolutely nothing special that Louise could fathom. It appeared to Louise and to the naked eye that it was just a panel. Louise felt cheated, she felt that the old seamstress had lied to her, had somehow deceived her by making her think the panel held the answer to how best to make dresses. Grabbing the spool of esparto thread, Louise deftly replaced the panel, immaculately going over each stitch to ensure that once she had finished then nobody could tell it had ever been tampered with

That afternoon when the seamstress returned she spoke to Louise “Here’s your pay for the rest of the month. Please don’t come back” That was it, with those few words, Louise’s world fell apart. She could barely look at her parents when she returned home that night, and it took a full hour for her to regain sufficient composure to let them know she had been dismissed. The

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