

SIMPLY SKIRTS

A Business Adventure of Emma McChesney
By EDNA FERBER

Author of "Down O'Hara," "Battered Side Down," etc.

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They may differ on the subjects of cigars, samples, hotels, ball teams and pinochle hands, but two things there are upon which they stand united. Every member of that fraternity which is condemned to a hotel bedroom, or a sleeper berth by night, and chained to a sample case by day agrees in this, first: That it isn't what it used to be. Second: If only they could find an opening for a nice, paying gent's furnishing business in a live little town that wasn't swamped with that kind of thing already they'd buy it and settle down like a white man, by George! and quit this peddling. The missus hates it anyhow; and the kids know the ice man better than they do their own dad.

On the morning that Mrs. Emma McChesney (representing T. A. Buck, Featherloom Petticoats) finished her talk with Miss Hattie Stitch, head of Kiser & Bloch's skirt and suit department, she found herself in a rare mood. She hated her job; she loathed her yellow sample cases; she longed to call Miss Stitch a green-eyed cat; and she wished that she had chosen some easy and pleasant way of earning a living, like doing plain and fancy washing and ironing. Emma McChesney had been selling Featherloom Petticoats on the road for almost ten years, and she was famed throughout her territory for her sane sunniness, and her love of her work. Which speaks badly for Miss Hattie Stitch.

Miss Hattie Stitch hated Emma McChesney with all the hate that a fast-chested, thin-haired woman has for one who can wear a large 36 without one inch of alteration, and a hat that turns sharply away from the face. For 46 weeks in the year Miss Stitch existed in Kiser & Bloch's store at River Falls. For six weeks, two in spring, two in fall, and two in mid-winter, Hattie lived in New York, with a capital L. She went there to select the season's newest models (slightly modified for River Falls), but incidentally she took a regular trousseau with her.

All day long Hattie picked skirt and suit models with unerring good taste and business judgment. At night she was a creature transformed. Every house of which Hattie bought did its duty like a soldier and a gentleman. Nightly Hattie powdered her neck and arms, performed sacred rites over her hair and nails, donned a gown so complicated that a hotel maid had to hook her up the back, and was ready for her evening's escort at eight. There wasn't a hat in a grill room from one end of the Crooked Cow-path to the other that was more wildly barbaric than Hattie's, even in these sane and simple days when the bird of paradise has become the national bird. The buyer of suits for a thriving department store in a bustling little middle-western town isn't to be neglected. Whenever a show came to River Falls Hattie would look bored, pass a weary hand over her glossy coiffure and say: "Oh, ycs. Clever little show. Saw it two winters ago in New York. This won't be the original company, of course." The year that Hattie came back wearing a set of skunk everyone thought it was lynx until Hattie drew attention to what she called the "brown tone" in it. After that Old Lady Heinz got her old skunk furs out of the moth balls and tobacco and newspapers that had preserved them, and her daughter cut them up into bands for the bottom of her skirt, and the cuffs of her coat. When Kiser & Bloch had their fall and spring openings the town came ostensibly to see the new styles, but really to gaze at Hattie in a new confection, undulating up and down the department, talking with a heavy Eastern accent about this or that being "smart" or "good this year," or having "a world of style," and sort of trailing her toes after her to give a clinging, Grecian line, like pictures of Ethel Barrymore when she was thin. The year that Hattie confided to some one that she was wearing only scant bloomers beneath her slinky silk the floor was mobbed, and they had to call in reserves from the basement ladies-and-misses-ready-to-wear.

Miss Stitch came to New York in March. On the evening of her arrival she dined with Fat Ed Meyers of the Strauss Sans-Silk Skirt company. He informed her that she looked like a kid, and that that was some classy little gown, and it wasn't every woman who could wear that kind of thing and get away with it. It took a certain style. Hattie smiled, and hummed off-key to the tune the orchestra was playing, and Ed told her it was a shame she didn't do something with that voice.

"I have something to tell you," said Hattie. "Just before I left I had a talk with old Kiser. Or rather, he had a talk with me. You know I have pretty much my own way in my department. Pity if I couldn't have. I made it. Well, Kiser wanted to know why I didn't buy Featherlooms. I said we had no call for 'em, and he came back with figures to prove we're losing a good many hundreds a year by not carrying them. He said the

Strass Sans-Silk skirt isn't what it used to be. And he's right." "Oh, say—" objected Ed Meyers. "It's true," insisted Hattie. "But I couldn't tell him that I didn't buy Featherlooms because McChesney made me tired. Besides, she never entertains me when I'm in New York. Not that I'd go to the theater in the evening with a woman, because I wouldn't, but— Say, listen. Why don't you make a play for her job? As long as I've got to put in a heavy line of Featherlooms you may as well get the benefit of it. You could double your commissions. I'll bet that woman makes her I-don't-know-how-many thousands a year."

Ed Meyers' naturally ruddy complexion took on a richer tone, and he dropped his fork hastily. As he gazed at Miss Stitch his glance was not more than half flattering. "How you women do love each other, don't you! You don't. I don't mind telling you my firm's cutting down its road force, and none of us knows who's going to be beheaded next. But—well—a guy wouldn't want to take a job away from a woman—especially a square little trick like McChesney. Of course she's played me a couple of low-down deals and I promised to get back at her, but that's business. Get—"

"So's this," interrupted Miss Hattie Stitch. "And I don't know that she is so square. Let me tell you that I heard she's no better than she might be. I have it on good authority that three weeks ago, at the River house, in our town—"

Their heads came close together over the little, rose-shaded restaurant table.

At 11 o'clock next morning Fat Ed Meyers walked into the office of the T. A. Buck Featherloom Petticoat company and asked to see old T. A. "He's in Europe," a stenographer informed him, "spaining, and sprudeling, and badening. Want to see T. A. Junior?"

"T. A. Junior!" almost shouted Ed Meyers. "You don't mean to tell me that fellow's taken hol—"

"Believe me. That's why Featherlooms are soaring and Sans-Silks are sinking. Nobody would have believed it. T. A. Junior's got a live wire looking like a stick of licorice. When they thought old T. A. was going to die, young T. A. seemed to straighten out all of a sudden and take hold. It's about time. He must be almost forty, but he don't show it. I don't know, he ain't so good-looking, but he's got swell eyes."

Ed Meyers turned the knob of the door marked "Private," and entered, smiling. Ed Meyers had a smile so cherubic that involuntarily you armed yourself against it.

"Hello Buck!" he called jovially. "I hear that at last you're taking an interest in skirts—other than on the hoof." And he offered young T. A. a large, dark cigar with a fussy-looking band encircling its middle. Young T. A. looked at it disinterestedly, and spake, saying:

"What are you after?"

"Why, I just dropped in—" began Ed Meyers lamely.

"The dropping," observed T. A. Junior, "is bad around here this morning. I have one little formula for all visitors today, regardless of whether they're book agents or skirt salesmen. That is, what can I do for you?"

Ed Meyers tucked his cigar neatly into the extreme right corner of his mouth, pushed his brown derby far back on his head, rested his strangely lean hands on his plump knees, and fixed T. A. Junior with a shrewd blue eye.

"That suits me fine," he agreed. "I never was one to beat around the bush. Look here. I know skirts from the draw-string to the ruffle. It's a woman's garment, but a man's line. There's 50 reasons why a woman can't handle it like a man. For one thing the packing cases weigh 25 pounds each, and she's as dependent on a packer and a porter as a baby is on its mother. Another is that if a man has to get up to make a train at 4 a. m. he don't require 25 minutes to fasten down three sets of garters, and braid his hair, and hook his waist up the back, and miss his train. And he don't have neuralgic headaches. Then, the head of a skirt department in a store is a woman, ten times out of ten. And lemme tell you," he leaned forward earnestly, "a woman don't like to buy of a woman. Don't ask me why. I'm too modest. But it's the truth."

"Well!" said young T. A., with the rising infection.

"Well," finished Ed Meyers, "I like your stuff. I think it's great. It's a seller, with the right man to push it. I'd like to handle it. And I'll guarantee I could double the returns from your middle-western territory."

T. A. Junior had strangely translucent eyes. Their luminous quality had an odd effect upon any one on whom he happened to turn them. He had been scrawling meaningless curly-cues on a piece of paper as Ed Meyers talked. Now he put down the pencil, turned, and looked Ed Meyers fairly in the eye.

"You mean you want Mrs. McChesney's territory?" he asked quietly.

"Well, yes, I do," confessed Ed Meyers, without a blush.

Young T. A. swung back to his desk, tore from the pad before him the piece of paper on which he had been scrawling, crushed it, and tossed it into the wastebasket with an air of finality.

"Take the second elevator down," he said. "The nearest one's out of order."

For a moment Ed Meyers stared, his fat face purpling. "Oh, very well," he said, rising. "I just made you a business proposition, that's all. I thought I was talking to a business man. Now, old T. A.—"

"That'll be about all," observed T. A. Junior, from his desk.

Ed Meyers started toward the door. Then he paused, turned, and came back to his chair. His heavy jaw jutted out threateningly.

"No, it ain't all, either. I didn't want to mention it, and if you'd treated me like a gentleman, I wouldn't have. But I want to say to you that McChesney's giving this firm a black eye. Morals don't figure with a man on the road, but when a woman breaks into this game, she's got to be on the level."

T. A. Junior rose. The blonde stenographer who had made the admiring remark about his eyes would have appreciated those features now. They glowed luminously into Ed Meyers' pale blue ones until that gentleman dropped his eyelids in confusion. He seemed at a disadvantage in every way, as T. A. Junior's lean, graceful height towered over the fat man's bulk.

"I don't know Mrs. McChesney," said T. A. Junior. "I haven't even seen her in six years. My interest in the business is very recent. I do know that my father swears she's the best salesman he has on the road. Before you go any further I want to tell you that you'll have to prove what you just implied, so definitely, and conclusively, and convincingly, that when you finish you'll have an ordinary engineering blue-print looking like a Turner landscape. Begin."

Ed Meyers, still standing, clutched his derby tightly and began.

"She's a looker, Emma is. And smooth! As the top of your desk. But she's getting careless. Now a decent, hard-working, straight girl like Hattie Stitch, of Kiser & Bloch's, River Falls, won't buy of her. You'll find you don't sell that firm. And they buy big, too. Why, last summer I had it from the clerk of the hotel in that town that she ran around all day with a woman named LeHaye—Blanche LeHaye, of an aggregation of bum burlesques called the Sam Levin Crackerjack Belles. And say, for a whole month there, she had a tough young kid traveling with her that she called her son. Oh, she's cueering your line, all right. The days are past when it used to be a signal for a loud, merry laugh if you mentioned you were selling goods on the road. It's a fine art, and a science these days, and the name of T. A. Buck has always stood for—"

Downstairs a trim, well-dressed, attractive woman stepped into the elevator and smiled radiantly upon the elevator man, who had smiled first.

"Hello, Jake," she said. "What's old in New York? I haven't been here in three months. It's good to be back."

"Seems grand 't see you, Miss McChesney," returned Jake. "Well, nothing much stirrin'.

Whatcha think of the Grand Central? I understand they're going to have a contrivance so you can stand on a mat in the waiting-room and wish yourself down to the track an' train that you're leavin' on. The G'intis have picked a bunch of shines this season. T. A. Junior's got a new 60-power auto. Genevieve—that yella-headed stenographer was married last month to Henry, the shipping clerk. My wife presented me with twin girls Monday. Well, thank you, Mrs. McChesney. I guess that'll help some."

Ed Meyers' eyes were shining. "I like your stuff. I think it's great. It's a seller, with the right man to push it. I'd like to handle it. And I'll guarantee I could double the returns from your middle-western territory."

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Emma McChesney swung down the hall and into the big, bright office. She paused at the head bookkeeper's desk. The head bookkeeper was a woman. Old Man Buck had learned something about the faithfulness of women employees. The head bookkeeper looked up and said some convincing things.

"Thanks," said Emma, in return. "It's mighty good to be here. Is it true that skirts are going to be full in the back? How's business? T. A. in?"

"Young T. A. is. But I think he's busy just now. You know T. A. Senior isn't back yet. He had a tight squeeze, I guess. Everybody's talking about the way young T. A. took hold. You know he spent years running around Europe, and he made a specialty of first nights, and first editions, and French cars when he did show up here. But now! He's changed the advertising, and designing, and cutting departments around here until there's as much difference between this place now and the place it was three months ago as there is between a hoop-skirt and a hobble. He designed one skirt— Here, Miss Kelly! Just go in and get one of those embroidery flounce models for Mrs. McChesney. How's that? Honestly, I'd wear it myself."

Emma McChesney held the garment in her two hands and looked it over critically. Her eyes narrowed thoughtfully. She looked up to reply when the door of T. A. Buck's private office opened, and Ed Meyers walked briskly out. Emma McChesney put down the skirt and crossed the office so that she and he met just in front of the little gate that formed an entrance along the railing.

Ed Meyers' mouth twisted itself into a smile. He put out a welcoming hand.

"Why, hello, stranger! When did you drive in? How's every little thing? I'm darned if you don't grow prettier and younger every day of your sweet life."

"Quit Sans-Silks?" inquired Mrs. McChesney briefly.

"Why—no. But I was just telling young T. A. in there that if I could only find a nice, paying little gent's furnishing business in a live little town that wasn't swamped with that kind of thing already I'd buy it, by George! I'm tired of this peddling."

"Sing that," said Emma McChesney. "It might sound better," and marched into the office marked "Private."

T. A. Junior's good-looking back and semi-bald head were toward her as she entered. She noted, approvingly, woman-fashion, that his neck would never lap over the edge of his collar in the back. Then young T. A. turned about. He gazed at Emma McChesney, his eyebrows raised inquiringly. Emma McChesney's honest blue eyes, with no translucent nonsense about them, gazed straight back at T. A. Junior.

"I'm Mrs. McChesney. I got in half an hour ago. It's been a good little trip, considering business, and politics, and all that. I'm sorry to hear your father's still ill. He and I always talked over things after my long trip."

Young T. A.'s expert eye did not miss a single point, from the tip of Mrs. McChesney's smart spring hat to the toes of her well-shod feet, with full stops for the fit of her tailored suit, the freshness of her gloves, the clearness of her healthy pink skin, the wave of her soft, bright hair.

"How do you do, Mrs. McChesney," think I ought to tell you that on the way in I met Ed Meyers of the Strauss Sans-Silk Skirt company, coming out. So anything you say won't surprise me."

"You wouldn't be surprised?" asked T. A. Junior smoothly. "If I were to say that I'm considering giving a man your territory?"

Emma McChesney's eyes—those eyes that had seen so much of the world and its ways, and that still could return your gaze so clearly and honestly—widened until they looked so much like those of a hurt child, or a dumb animal that has received a death wound, that young T. A. dropped his gaze in confusion.

Emma McChesney stood up. Her breath came a little quickly. But when she spoke, her voice was low and almost steady.

"If you expect me to beg you for my job, you're mistaken. T. A. Buck's Featherloom Petticoats have been my existence for almost ten years. I've sold Featherlooms six days in the week, and seven when I had a Sunday customer. They've not only been a livelihood, they've been my religion, my diversion, my life, my pet pastime. I've lived petticoats, I've talked petticoats, I've sold petticoats, I've dreamed petticoats—why, I've even worn the darned things! And that's more than any man will ever do for you."

Young T. A. rose. He laughed a little laugh of sheer admiration. Admiration shone, too, in those eyes of his which so many women found irresistible. He took a step forward and laid one well-shaped hand on Emma McChesney's arm. She did not shrink, so he let his hand slip down the neat blue serge sleeve until it reached her snugly-gloved hand.

"You're all right!" he said. His voice was very low, and there was a new note in it. "Listen, girlie. I've just bought a new sixty-power machine. Have dinner with me tonight, will you? And we'll take a run out in the country somewhere. It's warm, even for March. I'll bring along a fur coat for you. H'm?"

Mrs. McChesney stood thoughtfully regarding the hand that covered her own. The blue of her eyes and the pink of her cheeks were a marvel to behold.

"It's a shame," she began slowly, "that you're not twenty-five years younger, so that your father could give you the licking you deserve when he comes home. I shouldn't be surprised if he'd do it anyway. The Lord preserve me from these quiet, deep devils with temperamental hands and luminous eyes. Give me one of the bull-necked, red-faced, hoarse-voiced, fresh kind every time. You know what they're going to say, at least, and you're prepared for them. If I were to tell you how the hand you're holding is tingling to box your ears you'd marvel that any human being could have that much repression and live. I've heard of this kind of thing, but I didn't know it happened often

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T. A. Junior flung himself back in his chair and threw back his head and laughed at the ceiling.

"Then, 'How old is your son?' with disconcerting suddenness.

"Jock's scandalously near eighteen." In her quick mind Emma McChesney was piecing odds and ends together, and shaping the whole to fit Fat Ed Meyers. A little righteous anger was rising within her.

T. A. Junior searched her face with his glowing eyes.

"Does my father know that you have a young man son? Queer you never mentioned it."

"Queer? Maybe. Also, I don't remember ever having mentioned what church my folks belonged to, or where I was born, or whether I like my steak rare or medium, or what my maiden name was, or the size of my shoes, or whether I take my coffee with or without. That's because I don't believe in dragging private and family affairs into the business relation. I

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