
Farthings Five and Thirty

by Irene Squire

When my parents married in 1890 they left the grime and mills of west Yorkshire to take charge of a village school in Bedfordshire. They loved the green fields and fresh air and life seemed perfect until they became aware of the great poverty of the people among whom they were living. My father told me that many farm workers who had wives and children could only earn fifteen shillings a week, but they usually had vegetable gardens and they often kept hens and rabbits for which the children gathered dandelion leaves and groundsel from the road verges. The women and children used to glean wheat from the fields after harvest and that provided them with bread for a while.

It was a lacemaking district and the women added to the income by what they could earn with their lace. They worked at their pillows during every possible moment in the day and often through the night. I was told that a woman who did not work through four nights in the week was considered to be lazy.

When my parents arrived in the village there was considerable distress because there was no lace buyer in the district and the women had to walk seven miles to Bedford to sell their lace at a shop and there they had often to take half their payment in drapery goods. They did not usually want drapery. They wanted food. Sometimes when they reached the shop there would be a notice on the door saying "No Lace Bought Today", they then had to walk the seven miles back home with their lace unsold.

Mother became aware of this state of affairs by having children coming to the door early in the morning saying 'Please will you buy my mother's lace? We cannot have any breakfast unless she sells it'. The child would then open her Bible ready for the lace to be lifted out. It was usual when a piece of lace was finished to fold it up and then put it into the Bible to be pressed overnight. If the lacemaker had no paper to wrap the lace in, then the obvious thing to do was to deliver it to the buyer still in the Bible.

My mother kept on buying and sending the lace to friends and relations in Yorkshire, begging them to sell it to anyone who would take it. It was obvious that that market could not last for long. While Mother was wondering what to do next, an advertisement appeared in a paper from a London wholesale merchant asking for a buyer to work in the district. My Mother went round to everyone she thought who might take the job, but no-one dared risk the undertaking. Eventually she wrote to the wholesaler and told him that she knew nothing about lacemaking, but

that there was a great need for a buyer in the district and asking him if he would be willing to let her try. He said he had never had a buyer who could not make lace, but they could try, so they started.

Things did not go entirely smoothly at first and sometimes pieces of lace were returned because there was something wrong, such as handkerchief border not having an extra half-head to wrap over at the join, or there might be only two pairs of bobbins in a trail whose width required three pairs. Plaits and legs might be too loose and give the lace a limp feeling. This was commonly referred to as 'caggy' lace. However, nicely the Bible had pressed the lace each piece had to be opened out and looked at carefully. A problem for some workers was that their lace tended to be of a poor colour. Smoky chimneys, unwashed hands or soiled pillow cloths could all contribute, and the lace buyer needed to be aware of the workers' difficulties and of the conditions under which she had to work, so as to be able to advise tactfully.

Mother realised that if she was not to be left with various bits of sub-standard work on her hands she must find out all she could about lacemaking, so she asked several lacemakers if they would be willing to teach her how to make



Mrs Elston, who used to make lace in a shop window in Oxford Street.

lace. They told her that would be impossible, for no-one could learn to make lace after six years of age and the best age to begin was four. Mother was determined that she would not be beaten by a child of six and at last she found a lacemaker who was willing to try and teach her. They bought a pillow and bobbins and the lessons began the lacemakers looked on with interest and amazement. After some years they acknowledged that she was the best lacemaker they had ever seen.



My Mother made the collar.

Soon after the lace buying started other problems appeared. An order would arrive for a particular piece of lace of unusual shape or size and no known pattern for it existed. Dealing with such emergencies became my Father's special work. He would make corners, enlarge patterns or design completely new ones and then prick and ink the parchments. I do not think that he ever made any lace, but he knew so much about it that I do not think he would have had any difficulty.

I did not arrive on the scene until about twelve years after the beginning of the enterprise, and by then the worst of the poverty was over, though I remember being told that I must never accept gifts from poor people as I always had sufficient to eat and they often had not. I was told that it was my duty to give and never to take. Like the rest of the little girls in the village I started to make lace at four and grew up with the skill. When I heard of how my mother was taught I feel that possibly her late start was the reason that the sound of her lacemaking was not the same sound as other people's. Mother picked up her bobbins and put them down deliberately making a plop sound. The rest of us threw our bobbins and the sound was different and more pleasing to my ears, but of course I said nothing about it.

When the school broke up at four o'clock all we little girls were expected to settle down on reaching home to spend an hour at our pillows. The little boys had their jobs too, and they seemed to be more attractive, but there was no use in being envious. We were kept at our pillows. At school holiday times there was more time for making lace and we would sometimes take our pillows into the shade of a tree on the village green. Three or four little girls would work together and find a lot to talk about.



Myself with my own lace.

At that time I was making spider pattern handkerchief borders. I could usually make one in a week for which I was paid 7½d. As I was in the process of buying my own bobbins 6d was kept to pay for a bobbin and the other 1½d went into my money box. It was a dead-loss as far as I was concerned, because I knew that it would eventually go into the Post Office Savings Bank which seemed to be a very grasping organisation.

By the time my parents left Bedfordshire thirty-five years after going there the men were receiving better wages and the lace trade was consequently dwindling. It is good to know that the craft is becoming a hobby, for it is long since it could be a means of earning a living and it seems a pity that the skill should be lost. There is much pleasure in making a thing of beauty when one has time and is not forced to it by hunger.

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