

The Lacemaker

Gillian Candler

I told the Census man, some call me Esther, some Hester. It makes no difference to me what they call me, so long as I get paid for my lace. Twenty years ago now my love Edward died leaving me alone with the children barely grown. By then though the girls, Temperance and Ann were already learning to work the lace with me. But for my boy Edward, there was nothing to keep him here in Honiton, so he upped and left to chisel stone in Charmouth. He married that bright young thing Sarah Clarke. I didn't begrudge him that, she'll see him right. She's learned her letters, which is more than I can say for him or the girls. But we get by without, as long as we can read the lace - and the bobbins.

Without husband or son, we moved into a room at the Crown and Sceptre. Me, Temperance, Ann, and our apprentice another Ann. Not forgetting the two grandboys - how they came about is a story for another time. Henry's 11 and William's 4. That's the little one winding up the scraps for us nice and tidy like. And there's Henry in the courtyard, he makes a bit of money helping with the horses in this busy place. The travellers often stop to look at our lace, we sell a few bits and pieces that way, mostly pieces that the apprentice has made. The finer pieces are already spoken for.

We don't sit out here to market our wares. It's the light, see. Our room's too dark for lacemaking. That's why I'm wearing these shawls and bonnet, against all weathers. If it rains we sit in the porch, but some stormy days there's no lacemaking. I pray the storms don't come too often, we have so many mouths to feed.

My girls do the finer pieces, at 30 something they have the skill and their fingers aren't bent and tired like mine. My fingers are slower but I have all the patterns in my head. The girls still check theirs with me from time to time, although I'd scarce say they actually need my help. They humour me anyhow.

So this is us on the day the Census man came and took our details. He weren't that interested in the story of how my Edward died, or how the grandboys came to be. He was in a hurry and so we didn't bother to work out how old the girls were, I know my numbers and it looks like he jotted down 30 for both of them. They're always amused to be taken for twins, although both so different in temperament.

Which brings me to the name, Temperance. I had no choice in this, Temperance was Edward's mother's name, so of course the first girl had to be called that, especially as his mother died the year that Temperance was born. We were hopeful that the quality would stick, and in some ways it has, in others less so. She's given to dreams and disturbances. Mind you, the two Anns and I, we like to hear her latest dreams, they help to pass the time.

I had the oddest dream last night. Is how she'd often start. And today after the Census man had gone on to the next place, that's exactly what she said.

"Go on." said Ann.

"I will" said Temperance "if you don't keep interrupting."

We all sighed at this, but kept mum and soon she started up again.

"I dreamt I met one of yours." she looked at me. "One of your great-great grand-daughters, I don't know how many greats it could have been. Maybe five. Anyhow she looked at me as if through a clear window, really stared as if trying to make out my features. She talked funny, not posh exactly but not from around here. I asked her then, and she said the name of the place but I hadn't heard of it. But imagine my surprise when she says it's the South

Seas, all the way around there by ship she said. Not with the convicts mind, it were another place. I could see then the sky behind her was the brightest blue and the trees a rich green, colours we never see around here.

“ She looked at what I were making. In my dream it was the finest lace collar I ever made. Don’t you get bored she said, making lace all day. It was hard to answer that, as I never thought about that before. So I said it’s good to keep busy, the hands must be doing something, and we make good money. She smiled at that. She showed me then a piece of cross-stitch she was making, like something a child would do. I reckon Henry or even William could do better. I was that embarrassed for her, but she seemed so pleased at her blue dragonflies. I do this in the evenings she said, and I saw then that her evenings were lit by bright lights, as bright as day. She showed me things you wouldn’t believe. Fires that started with switches, train carriages that didn’t need tracks, a giant silver bird that flew with people in it.”

“Oh Temperance” cried Ann. “How could those things be!”
She was caught up in the story just like me. We were trying to picture these things but they were all so improbable.

“Well anyway” Temperance continued “ I couldn’t imagine she was rich, her face was brown from the sun, and she wore trousers like a man. I asked her if she worked on a farm, maybe a farmer’s wife, I thought. But no she said she was a writer. Writing books and stories. ‘I’m writing about you’ she said ‘I found you in the Census.’ ”
At that we all gasped. I’d been afraid that the Census man wasn’t honest and would use our names for some purpose we couldn’t understand. But that our names might be passed to a great grand-daughter is a thought I liked. Although I knew this was no more than Temperance’s wild imaginings.