

CHAPTER VI

Elsie plays her part, 1922 – The Lace Factory – Mr Phelps helps out - Perry Street Mill – Bobbin Lace - Lace Hand - Earning a Living – Ten years before the loom - Leaving the mill - In-Service – Forde Abbey - Mrs Roper - Lady's Maid – Up-stairs, downstairs - Days out – A visit to London – Ladies night – Courting and Marriage.

Girls from agricultural labourer's families in their first job often only worked for their keep - so that they might receive training and eventually that much sought after reference. The turnover of servants was high the average time in a first job was three years. Positions for more skilled trades were found through the grapevine – the church, tradesmen, family or friends.

My mother started work, four years after the Great War finished, in 1922 - immediately on leaving school at the age of fourteen. Her father, aged fifty-two, was employed as an independent lace engineer at Small & Tidmus net factory doing maintenance work.

Elsie's mother Rosa was looking after ten of her children at home. [It is uncertain if they were all living together, but certainly seven were – which made Rosalie Cottage very cramped living indeed.] The eldest child Dora was twenty-two, who worked as a lacemender - one of a group of women who checked the lace for breakages and snags - repairing holes by drawing threads together. Four years later, she married Sidney Wood and left home, to live in Bridport. The youngest child Vera, adopted, was now aged four.

The number of children conceived close together was normal for the working class and the lack of living space common for the poor. The obvious lack of family planning being the result of the absence of sex education, lack of discipline and personal ambition... there was also a degree of, 'conforming to

general behaviour patterns'. Even though there was a national exodus to the cities and towns, there were still insufficient jobs and housing.

In the 1920s, neither the Tatworth Parish Housing Scheme, at Wellings Close provides sufficient housing nor did the Perry Street Factory cottages mainly taken up by retired workers. This shortage mainly affected the growing population of young people with children. Money was short, jobs hard to come by and even when they did, the choice was limited; everything had to be within cycle range.

It is not generally realized that between the end of the First World War and 1922, one quarter of the land in Britain changed hands. It was not appreciated at the time and has scarcely been written about after. It was not just one factor that brought this about... the great landowners were short of cash, and they were tired... Tired of the responsibility after so many of the owners and their male progeny killed in the slaughter at the front. It could have been put down to taxation, poor grain harvests, imported grain prices forcing down its profitability and the decline in the old tenant. Landlord system. However, I do not think it was. It came a head... the old ways could not continue. The aristocracy had let them down now it was the turn of the Trades Unions and the Labour Party. Surely, the workers could rely upon each other.

In the twenties, most working-class families expected their children to contribute to the running of the household. Tasks were learnt by following their parents round the home helping as they went. The boys took on the heavier work whilst the girls helped with the sewing and food preparation... water had to be bought from the stream... each day had its routine of household chores. Even though Tatworth had two main employers that made the village more self sufficient for jobs at least forty per cent of labour was connected to the land.

Agricultural prices had been falling for six months and continued to fall. The price of wheat had halved in six months and the farmers, to combat this, shed workers, reduced prices and reduced the acreage of cereal cultivation. It took ten years of struggle for the farming industry to recover and by 1932, the Wheat Act guaranteed prices and control through Marketing Boards.

Knowing that her daughter needed work her mother arranged for her son Cecil, to introduce Elsie to Mr Phelps - the manager of the lace mill. Her good references and connection with the factory - through the family, ensured that she would stand a good chance of being employed - to become a trained lace hand. This was no light matter. Only one child in six was offered training of some kind, and to be an apprentice was even more difficult...

My mother's references and good school report stood her in good stead. She started work at the Small & Tidmus net factory in 1922, the fourth member of the Collins family to work there. This was three years before the 'mule' spinners, became the first group of workers to be enrolled as legalized trade unionists. The man in charge of the lace factory was Fred Phelps who lived at the top of St Margaret's Lane, opposite the thatched chapel of ease.

The Perry Street Lace Mill was Tatworth's main employer giving work to over fifty people in lean times and a hundred when in full production. The mill had been developed by Cuff & Co. in 1830. Ten years later J B Payne had bought it but had very little capital to develop the mill. The power was supplied by a feeder pond discharging into leats. During the next ten years, the industry was in the doldrums and the workers on half time.

This unsettled production was caused by the usual social problems – industrialization, labour problems, cost of living,

export restrictions, fashion changes and wars. In effect, lace for fashion was a luxury; however, for mosquito netting it had a permanent place in the nations shopping list - during wars and troop settlements abroad – later for parachute silk.

Mr Phelps, the works manager, saw to it that Elsie was properly taught, and then she was placed under the watchful eye of one of the senior lace hands... It was not long before she was crawling about under the looms joining the broken thread in company with the other girls. Eventually she was allowed to wind the bobbins. The Manchester spinners, their wagons rolled into the mill yard at frequent intervals, supplied the yarn by the **hank, which** were slipped over the free-running spoked frame and drawn off by Elsie and her fellow trainee girls **to** wooden **bobbins**.

When sufficiently filled the wooden bobbins were placed into a basket, taken to the machine bobbin rack, and placed in rows... their threads taken through feeder guides to **brass bobbins**, an inch and a half diameter within a slim case. Once winding completed they were packed tightly into a bobbin carriage ready to be inserted into the lace machine. The yarn from each bobbin **threaded** through an eyelet.

Another rack was filled with a long line of wooden bobbins their threads drawn off and taken through guides, to converge with others – **warping** onto a drum. From the drum groups of threads taken off onto a long roller called the beam... this beam was then taken to the lace machine and placed in position.

A bundle of threads were then untied lead through guides to the net roller and when given tension - the warp was ready. The brass bobbin carriages then set into slots in the machine. The machine was set into motion. The weft thread was given a twist as it engaged with the warp thread **making** a series of interlocking loops.

There Elsie worked with her assistant for ten years, with the great mill wheel, within the building on the floor below, revolving with enough weight and power to shake the building, throbbing and thrusting away, as it gathered speed. A clackerty pulsating action that seemed to be beating time with your pulse. The mill's power transferred by an iron shaft beneath; above, on every floor, the pulleys, spindles, cogs running in and out, and drive belts slap and clap as they start the bobbins spinning... then nothing but the mighty crescendo could be heard. The lace hands signalled to each other by hand, mouthing the words – much like the deaf and dumb. The world trembles as the tiny cotton particles dance to the tune. It was the job of her father to repair and make his own machines in the workshop alongside the mill.

The 'lace hand' or 'twist hand' worked with a boy or girl to look after a pair of machines... setting the machine up – un-tying a bundle of warp threads... leading them through the guides to the net roller, to be tensioned. When the brass bobbins were slotted into carriages the machine was ready to start... knitting - twisting as it engaged with the warp thread. The labourers made up the largest numbers in the mill followed by lace menders and lace hands.

After learning the trade, she was paid five shillings a week; a labourers wage was forty-six shillings. Nearly all lace manufacturers kept a general store and made the workers take goods for money. Two loaves of bread and half a pound of butter formed part of the weekly allowance. Mother could well remember the noise made by the machinery, the dust and the fluff that flew about – being breathed in... and the danger of fire and explosions. She worked among the rows of whirling spindles where the threads often broke when the tension was too great... twisted and spun. Her first job was to repair these broken ends as quickly as possible moving as fast as she could taking care not to

slip on the oil-soaked wooden floors. It was so hot in the spinning and weaving sheds maintaining a moist atmosphere to prevent the threads breaking... that the girls wore just their slippers throughout each day. Elsie stayed there for ten years until she was twenty-four, working her way up the ladder... becoming one of the senior lace hands.

Both men and women operated a number of looms packed closely together. Although this made a short distance to cover, it was tightly packed. The operator had to maintain his or her own looms making sure the area was swept clear and the machine oiled. The breaks in the cotton and lack of weft made good if the young trainee girls were not there. The weaving sheds were kept cool and damp in summer and steam heated in winter... the object being to stop the cotton from breaking and assist in a better weave. However, the dripping condensation and damp atmosphere did nothing for colds and chills. In summer, the floors kept damp to hold down the flying dust and fluff, which could become a hazard being flammable and causing lung damage. From accounts of factory life at the turn of the century it is obvious that the working conditions for both men and women would not remain in such a depressing state... relying on time to heal the sore expected... however, forces more urgent pushed evolution.

The comparison is easy to make between the periods prior to each of the World Wars... both lengthy agricultural depressions. It is also not difficult to see why these depressions were immediately reversed by rearmament and conscription. The second agricultural revolution saw the state intervene to reconstruct rural Britain. There was an urgency to expand production at any cost we were to become self-sufficient.

Grandfather gave up being a self-employed lace mill engineer when he was sixty-five, in 1935. The Salter & Stokes creamery had open up in South Chard near to Chard Junction some years previously and he and his sons went to work there. In the 1938, The Wiltshire United Dairies stated a milk processing plant on the site, the most modern in the world at the time. Shortly afterwards it became part of the United Dairies Group... then in turn Cow & Gate... all part of the Unigate Group. Now there was no family connection with the lace mill.

Only a cycle ride away from Tatworth is Forde Abbey. Mrs Elizabeth Roper [d1943] inherited the Cistercian foundation of Forde in 1905 from her cousin Mr William Evan. The original abbey had been built to accommodate twelve brothers in 1142 – after taking six years to build. By 1200, it was considered one of the major scholastic, religious foundations in Britain, continuing its role until the dissolution of the monasteries in 1539. The last abbot, Thomas Chard considerably enlarged the building adding the cloisters. After the dissolution, it fell into decay until bought a hundred years later by Sir Edmund Prideaux –who later became Oliver Cromwell’s Attorney General - further enlarged it to today proportions. In 1702, the estate came by marriage to Sir Francis Gwym, whose inheritors continued the ownership until a relation of the present family, Mrs Bertram Evans, bought the building and nearly two thousand acres of land, including five farms, in 1864.

In 1905, there were eight resident servants for the family. The in-house servants included a housekeeper, governess, a nurse and nursery-maid, a cook. A parlour maid, and a ‘tweeny’, who combined the duties of housemaid with those of the kitchen. For outside duties, a coachman/chauffeur and stable-man who occupied the stable mews, whose duties involved driving the new car – the brougham was still kept, as were a pair of horses for

carriage work, and a hunter for him. Head gardener with a staff of four who maintained a kitchen garden and park, and pig man whose duties included the pig-sty, chicken houses and milking the cow. The laundry was done outside the house in the village, as was the shoeing of the horses. Increasingly the number of servants was reduced the work taken over by part-time staff. As the main services were introduced so there was a further reduction in staff. Before mains water was piped to the abbey, there was a great deal of water to be supplied to the rooms daily. There was three breakfasts to prepare - for the nursery and schoolroom at eight and for the dining room at nine.

It was the housekeeper's job to control and direct the staff inside the house. Many of the servant's duties carried over into other tasks to help. The gardener and stable-hand trimmed the lamps, filled the lamp's bowls and pumped water into the cistern.

Life at the abbey was highly structured. To maintain the house and grounds required an enormous amount of work... it needed to be painted on a regular basis both inside and out and the grounds kept mown. The annual spring clean was a major event when a number of village girls were employed to dust, polish, and attend to the crystal chandeliers.

Mrs Roper announced locally that there was a vacancy for a live-in woman's maid/house-cleaner. It was common knowledge that the Ropers were good employers – considerate towards their staff. Her sister told Elsie that there was a vacancy for a maid and it was for this post she applied after telling the foreman at the lace factory her intentions to apply. The management graciously supplied her with good references to go with the application. She soon heard back that her application was satisfactory that she was expected to attend an interview in a few days. This she did and the interview was a success to the extent that she was offered the position of ladies maid instead.

Elsie considered she was very fortunate, excited by the thought of leaving the mill - having a far gentler, cleaner, superior job.

She was lucky to be employed by someone considered a good employer. Mrs Roper was fortunate too, in that my mother was very keen to leave the mill - to do more gentle and refined work, in comfortable surroundings. In 1932 at the age of 24, Elsie left the lace factory for good. The job description was changed to that of 'Lady's Maid', after my mother had been interviewed. Mrs Roper was delighted to find someone who understood quilting and cap making even though they were outdated skills. A Lady's Maid was often expected to originate new dress designs whilst updating others. Her other main task was to dress and fashion her mistresses hair. Having worked at the Lace Mill, she was familiar with the skill of maintaining-materials, cleaning, stitching and re-adapting old work.

This was towards the end of the Depression - things were just beginning to 'look-up'. It was a new start for my mother, at a time when there was more optimism about. It was also the time when many estates were breaking up. The wealthy had tried to hold on skimping here and there trying to make ends meet. Many failed and their homes sold up. There were many house sales. Land was sold to absentee landlords as an investment. The old ways stated to disappear. Into this new world, my mother trod without knowing where it would lead. She had been offered the position of Lady's Maid and she was excited, as she had just cause to be...!

The four year period between the end of the First World War and Elsie 'going into service', one-quarter of the land in Britain changed hands - the largest change of ownership since the dissolution of the monasteries - it was the break-up of the landed estates. Once again, much of the land ended up being cultivated by farmers. There was a shortage of domestic labour,

rationing was imposed and the state intervened in the running of the countryside. All these things were to affect Mr and Mrs Roper. Forde Abbey survived and continued to play a part in society. Even if they had to show a little more discretion...

A Lady's Maid was a considerable step up in the world, no more backbreaking work replacing shuttles. There was always the possibility of visiting London, which she had to agree to do before accepting the job. Quite often Elsie wore clothes handed down to her although she was obliged to alter the dress so that it was not recognisable as her Mistresses. Her ordinary dress was black stockings and close fitting floral dress. There was a strict code of behaviour even though Mrs Roper was easy going. My mother would never speak badly about her mistress and nothing would ever induce Mrs Roper to disparage her maid's character.

Elsie's position in the household was just below that of the housekeeper – above the nurse, and about the same as the governess. Most came from middle-class parents in reduced circumstances, which is why my mother was so delighted to be offered the position. Her income was £20 per week. Although the work was not arduous, she was very much kept on the go – adjusting Mrs Roper's hair, changing her clothes and preparing for the next outing. The biggest drawback to the job was that generally the mistress preferred their personal maid to be young, good looking and well turned out. As the older ladies maids lost their calm so fear of unemployment followed.

Mum was woken at seven every morning by the housemaid to quickly wash and comb her hair; her day lasted until ten o'clock at night having half an hour for breakfast, tea and supper, and an hour for dinner. She had to be ready at half-past seven to take tea and toast, the morning paper and any letters to Mrs Roper. The bath had filled and the toiletries prepared, before taking breakfast with the other servants in the Servants Hall.

Immediately afterwards she had to be upstairs to help her Mistress to dress.

She had a comfortable bedroom next door to her mistress. The bed was made for her by the upstairs maid, with clean sheets every week. There was hot water for her bath and jug, and on cold night a hot water bottle. Once a week she had her own tablet of soap and a lighted candle placed by her bed at seven. Her main tasks were to correct, alter, make-up her mistresses clothes in the sewing room and attend to her mistresses every want.

Dinner was at one o'clock, the first course in the Hall, and the second in Nan's [the governess'] room. Work started an hour later, completing her morning work. A walk in the grounds could take up the rest of the day until teatime at four, when it was time for a buffet meal of sandwiches and cake. This lasted a further hour when the mistress's clothes were to be prepared for the evening - or, for 'calling'. The timing for the evening's entertainment discussed well before.

It was now four years after the First World War. The services reduced to pre-war levels... the influx of so many men onto the job market created massive unemployed. There were groups of men on every street corner around the job centres. The social changes brought into being by women taking over men's jobs changed forever the role of women. They liked the responsibility and the freedom from household drudgery... women were not going to give up their newfound status. Women's fashions displayed this change - skirts and dresses were designed to be worn level with the knee. It was the age of the flappers - short straight dresses, dropped waistlines, cloche hats and short hair - cut in a shingle, or bob if slightly longer. The Marcel effect, corrugated waves, was achieved by using curling tongs.

It was the time for women to display boyish figures to go with the shingles and long cigarette holders. Waist was small, and hips and busts kept in proportion. Undergarments changed, now waists compressed in roll-on girdles with suspenders attached – stocking always worn. A shapeless bra known as a bandeau flattened the bust. Over these were worn cami-knickers or a camisole and French knickers.

Length of outer garments kept well above the knee consisting of sleeveless dresses with dropped waistlines. Strait skirts with perhaps box pleating that mother had to continually iron. Shoes had medium heels, pointed toes and a bar across the instep, considered very stylish. Hats were cloches, tightly fitting over the ears with a close turned-back brim. It was mother's job to sew trimmings of ribbon on the hats to match the suit worn for the next day.

Each morning's task was to prepare Mrs Ropers clothes, for the day as well as seeing that the previous were put away - clean and tidy. Any repairs set aside for future work by the seamstress. There was generally an hour for needlework and specialist ironing. Once Mrs Roper was ready for her day and had left her bedroom the room was tidied, bed aired and remade and the next set of clothes laid out for the afternoon or for travelling out – walking or riding in the dog-cart. Carpets cleaned, surfaces dusted and dressing glass polished. At monthly intervals the furniture was polished.

If a shopping trip arranged then mum would accompany Mrs Roper to help her with the bags and be a companion. If visiting, presents or gifts set aside ready for the occasion. If she stayed in there would be tea, served in the Servants Hall at eleven...

In the winter, it was mum's job to make-up - keep lit, the bedroom fire - to ensure the room aired. A clotheshorse draped

with recently ironed clothes to air them properly. The lake in the garden, enclosed by the flower borders and tall trees, held the evening air, which made the house damp if the windows left open and fires not kept in.

The Servants dinner served at midday and taken with the rest of the staff. The pudding, and after dinner tea served in the Housekeeper's Room where mum's friend Nan, who was the governess, entertained her.

Between the hours of two and four – when tea served in the Servants Hall, mum was able to catch up on her sewing and any leisure-time practices before helping Mrs Roper to dress for Afternoon Tea - served at five. She may have visited the garden to arrange with the Gardener to cut some flowers for the bedroom.

Thereafter, the bedroom was set ready for preparation - dressing Mrs Roper for dinner and the evening's entertainment. This started at half-past six and ended with tidying up the room and toiletries, preparing the bed, inserting the hot water bottles, which were changed at half past eight. An hour later supper served in the Servants Hall after which the rest of the evening given over to leisure activities until the Mistress retired to bed when the final undressing supervised.

Her life revolved around Mrs Roper who always referred to her as Miss Collins. A lady's maid had to be with her mistress all the time whether at home or away. Every piece of clothing had to be in perfect condition - properly washed, ironed or steam-cleaned. All sewing completed, the dressing table equipped with all the necessary items and the bathroom laid out ready for use. For the lady of the house her maid was not only a helper but a confidant and friend.

Elsie was expected to travel with Mrs Roper wherever she went - to supervise her comforts and to carry anything

extraneous. For the annual move to London - for the 'season' the ladies maid went along as did the chauffeur. This state of affairs for the wealthy was going through a transition period. Increasingly young staff did not want to enter service - the duties were considered boring and beneath them. Socialists and Trade Unionists, pointed out that servants were being exploited and should seek better wages and the 'Girls' Friendly Society considered the moral welfare of the young. Inheritance Tax finished off what industrialization started. The Second World War completed the transition not just the death of many young men who would have received an estate as an inheritance but the rise of Socialism and the victory of the Labour party. By the time, Elsie started her new job the General Strike was in the past and the Government bent on rearming the nation. A period of full employment, massive house building and euphoria took the place of stagnation and decay.

The lady's maid was responsible for dressing her employer's hair and laying out all the clothes to be worn that day - for every occasion. Dignity at all times and in all places was essential. Mrs Roper used Pond's Cold Cream at night and Pond's Vanishing Cream during the day, with a hint of rouge under a thin dusting of powder. Cremola hand cream used to soften the hands and scented lavender soap was at the side of the basin. Gloves of soft leather, white for summer and brown for winter, washed by my mother and dried very slowly to retain their softness.

My mother stayed with Mrs Roper for only a year... as a companion rather than as a Lady's Maid. That same year, 1933, she met her future husband at a Masonic dinner... they married ... at St John the Evangelist, Tatworth and the wedding breakfast

held at Rosalie Cottage. Three years later, I was baptised – held at the font, not far away, from where my parents were married...

It was a long way for my mother to have travelled... From the garden gate, that lead out onto the street; the stream and its bridge - that never ceased to play a part in every day life; the dominant school building opposite - refusing to play a minor role, and of course, 'The Mill'... and the childhood, teenage friends - all enduring, the cold, the damp and the clammer...

The secure family routine... closeness of relations and friends... wandering the country lanes - looking over the hedges at trees on far off purple hills, that touched the sky...; all things of the past but retained inside...

Now it was to be a life of suburban pavement and shops... children, a pram and brick built house..., cinema and shops... all that makes for town-life. I am sure it was all, what my mother wanted - imagined in her dreams... whilst working away at the looms, and later... attending Mrs Roper.

It may not seem an enormous step, to travel from rural cottage to suburban semi, but it was for my mother. Perhaps it was love that gave her the strength to endure the concrete to the brick-lined path. Still, we must agree, it must have been very exciting to marry 'a man about town', especially one who was a 'war hero!'

Elsie's upbringing, despite the obvious lack of amenity and convenience did include security and love – the sort of love common to the time not sentimental and clinging. What stood her in good stead was her love and understanding of nature, which permeated her soul. She had witnessed the change in how the land was managed. The reliance on the horse now given over to the tractor, the decline in the number of village craftsmen and the move away from country ways to industrial muscle. The deferential attitude accorded to higher social classes by

generations of tenants and workers were now questioned – changed for good after World War 1. Peoples ambitions, like my mother's, did not included working three looms for the rest of her life. She wanted a bit of luxury not servitude... Mum could easily have returned to Tatworth, but, as with all dreams, reality dictated otherwise... what price then a glow-worm in the ditch instead of a street lamp... It is just like forgetting the pain of fingers thawing out, especially when the sun is burning the back of one's neck!

By the time mum took us on holiday she had been living away from home for nine years. In those nine years she had been in service, married, moved to two London suburbs, had as many children... whilst suffering the blitz. Not only had her life changed, but work back at the mill had altered too... Her father had been retired for six years, missing the bombs, randomly dropped on the mill. The mill by 1941 was turning out mosquito nets for the Far East... the village meanwhile became inward looking when the blackout descended. Rationing had to be coped with and the extra hour of double-summertime allowed more work to be done in daylight hours. The Make-do-and-Mend slogan, initiated by the government, indicated the sort of attitude that should be adopted - for a country under siege. The already hard rural existence was made harder still by shortages and absentee men folk. It was the woman's job to 'make ends meet', which they did, turning to age-old methods of living off the country. They had not only the means to do so but also past experience to draw on. In fact, there was little change in the life of the Collins' family or in the day-to-day life in the village. Some of the innocence and obedience, dignity and pride had rubbed off, replaced by: better education, fewer acceptances of past rules and regimes, more casual attitude to dress formalities, manners and etiquettes.

Elsie never forgot her early life, which shaped everything she did. Recounting those times brought her eyes alive and a smile to her lips. Giving time to her past kept the memories dust-free - easily plucked from her memory-bank in times of stress. She could recall and name the trees down the lane, the shrubs in the hedges lining the winding path, and the wild flowers in the meadow. The ford and the bridge, not far from the garden gate, served the brook, which bubbled and chuckled as generations of laughing children played in its crystal-clear water. Flocks of sheep passed over the bridge, hurried on by the shouts from the shepherd, later, the farmer's cows pushed and shoved to get to their stalls - to be milked. The banks that lined the waters edge burgeoned with rush and thyme, waterlillies and cowsfoot. The willow in the hedge, beneath which the waters flowed, alive with chattering sparrows pecking at the berries then wiping their beaks on the lichen covered boughs. All these she left behind... for a town life, she hankered for... to step away from the fluffy, damp atmosphere of the lace mill and in-service attendance upon Mrs Roper. All these pictures were the rock upon which she clung, recalling their colours and shapes to pass on... more to satisfy her longings than to educate us children.

The chapters here arranged in such a manner to give a rise and fall to the story. The beginning describes a hill that allows the panoply to open out - an entrenchment, there since ancient times, sheltering our forebears. My grandparent's house, the garden and stream, bridged over to flow under the hedge to the field beyond. The lane outside leads to the school and mill where most of the population work. Finally mother's marriage and my christening..., forming a link with the past. She would be pleased her tale is told...!