

Mrs Fitzherbert's Silk Ribbons

We work in silence excepting the occasional sharp intake of breath accompanying a needle-pricked finger. The silk slips in my hands with the incessant nature of flowing water; I bite down on my lip in concentration, the blood tastes of old cutlery. Sister says that silkworm larva insatiably devour young mulberry leaves, always straining towards that leaf which is just out of reach.

The first time I saw Her was in church, during my first week at the school, as we shuffled in for Morning Prayer.

'That's Her', whispered Mary, my new-found ally, nodding towards an elderly lady in one of the foremost pews. I shrugged, bemused.

'Mrs Fitzherbert, Her that was married to the fat king!'

Mary and I slumped in the back row with the other charity school girls, avoiding stern glances from Sister. I gazed at Her well-postured form throughout the sermon, imagined what it would be like to live in a grand house, be educated in Paris and wrapped in fine fabrics. I couldn't see Her face; all I learned in that initial sighting was through Her deportment, Her slow, deliberate glides from knee, to seat, to foot.

The silk ribbons I piece together are striped-green and vivid-pink. Mary's are floral and the other girls work with a whole array of shades and patterns. Together we are making a coverlet as diverse in colour and rich in radiance as the display of a strutting peacock. I've heard tell of French Huguenots in their three storey cottages where, in the highest rooms, they weave sunlight in with the silk to make it shine. I feel sure the use of colour and light will substitute our lack of skill; as despite our best efforts we are not yet accomplished sewers.

The next time I came across Her she was visiting with a donation of books and clothes. I hid in the schoolroom doorway as Sister spoke to Her in the entrance hall. I caught only half-words but as I peered out our eyes tacked and she gave me a swift wink. It was quick enough that Sister didn't notice and scold me for lurking, and so temporary that, as soon as I ducked away, I was questioning whether we had ever connected at all.

Our coverlet is taking shape; the ribbons forming chevrons which fit neatly one behind the other. As we work Sister keeps check on us and lectures on the life cycle of the silkworm. They go through a progression of four molts, discarding their old skin and creeping out wearing the latest, like a succession of ladies dresses, moving with the fashions of the times. I finger the purple silk I'm making into small triangles for the coverlet's border. Raising it to my cheek I touch its softness against my own and inhale the musty scent of bygone ballrooms, mingled with an expensive floral sweetness. I notice Mary's stare, and hurriedly lower my hands.

On one occasion I slipped away from school and walked little more than a mile to Steine House, the home the King's own architect had built for Her. I leant on the left wall, in a

narrow street perpendicular to the main street. It was a comfort knowing she was near, an elderly woman to whom I had never uttered a word but in whose generosity I had been cocooned. I waited all morning and was rewarded for my patience as, just before noon, a carriage pulled up by the veranda. She emerged in a white gown, drawn in under the bust by a blue ribbon, matched by the fair-weather skies. Black lace adorned Her hair and draped across Her shoulders. She was soon in the carriage and away, but the caning I endured for my unapproved venture was worth having that small scene etched into my memory.

The coverlet will soon be ready, from its centre it has gradually spiralled outwards. It is now so large we have had to push four tables together to hold it whilst we sew. I wonder how many hours of work have been put into it, not just at the school but elsewhere too, by worm and weaver. I think how varied must be the memories tangled in its threads; of the worms; of factories and cottages in Coventry, Macclesfield and London; of dances, dinners and royal company; and finally of the school, of Sister, Mary, the girls and me. Silk is made from the cocoons of silkworms, so says Sister, and the cocoons in turn are made from the spit of the worms. So silk is animal, formed from part of the worms themselves. I like to imagine that the coverlet is a creature alive with the memories of us all who, whilst wearing or working, left a part of ourselves within it too.

On a morning towards the end of March, we were reciting from the catechism when Sister was called away by a knock at the door. She was gone for some time and the girls started to get restless, muttering and giggling. I looked at Mary who merely shrugged. Sister finally returned with slow, soft steps and a look of gravity upon her face. She held in one hand a newspaper and in the other a large sack. Hushing us, she told us she had some upsetting news to impart, with this she shook out the newspaper and read the announcement of Her death. She then proceeded to pull open the sack, and tipped upon the desk a colourful multitude of silks and ribbons. There they lay entwined like ethereal larvae, left to fend for themselves. 'Her final donation'.

It is done. A pastel core surrounded by clusters of proud, peacock chevrons and four appliquéd flower-patches for their garden. Mary says the central ivories and whites remind her of a wedding gown. She romanticizes that the ribbons therein were part of Her dress, when she married the prince in Her drawing room. I'm not so sure; I like to think of Her unbound, as not having belonged to anyone. Sister has brought her discourse to a close; inside their cocoons the worms liquefy and reform into moths. Before they are able to break out, they are plunged into hot water, their cocoons unravelling into yards of fine silk thread. The moths die, by-products of their own creations.

Walking along Bristol Road I think of the coverlet which Sister sold. I don't know where it ended up or how it was finished. I ponder on what appliqué or design may be covering its pale heart. Such a long time has passed. I had, with Sister's help, secured a place as a dressmaker's apprentice, and undergone two years hard labour. Finally I broke away, becoming my own mistress. I am visiting Her, as I regularly do, at St John the Baptist Church. This is the same place I saw Her for the first time, over a decade ago. A monument

was mounted in the church by Her adopted daughter, in it she kneels with the lamp of memory. Multihued light, dyed by stained-glass, is caught in the gilding of the lamp. As I watch, a moth, emancipated, settles there.



Photograph by Jacqueline Banerjee.

<http://www.victorianweb.org/sculpture/crew/2.html>

The inscription reads:
IN A VAULT NEAR THIS SPOT ARE DEPOSITED

THE REMAINS OF
MARIA FITZHERBERT
SHE WAS BORN ON THE XXVI OF JULY MDCCLVI
AND EXPIRED AT BRIGHTON ON THE XXVII OF MARCH
MDCCCXXXVII
ONE TO WHOM SHE WAS MORE THAN A PARENT HAS PLACED
THIS MONUMENT TO HER REVERED AND BELOVED MEMORY
AS AN HUMBLE THOUGH FEEBLE TRIBUTE OF HER EVERLASTING
GRATITUDE AND AFFECTION
R.I.P.