

THE NEEDLES OF SHEEPCOTE PRIMARY Gervase Phinn 1.

I moved around the classroom at Sheepcote Primary School, talking to the children about the tasks they were undertaking that morning.

On a table, in the corner, were two boys busy sewing. One looked as if he had been dragged through a hedge backwards. He had spiky hair, a round red face and large ears. His nose was running and a front tooth was missing. His shirt was hanging out, his socks were concertinaed around his ankles, his legs were covered in cuts and bruises, and his shoes were so scuffed I could not tell whether they were originally black or brown. His hands and face were both entirely innocent of soap and water. His companion looked as healthy as a prize-winning bull. He was a very large, amiable-looking boy with a round moon of a face, great dimpled elbows and knees, and fingers as fat as sausages. Both boys were surrounded by threads, cottons, fabrics, an assortment of needles, boxes of pins and scissors and both were sewing furiously, their arms rising and falling like pistons. ,

'Hello,' I said brightly.

'Hello,' replied the larger boy. His companion continued to sew with a vengeance, his eyes narrowed in concentration.

'And how are you?'

'Middlin' well,' replied the large boy.

'And what are you two up to?' I asked amiably.

'Samplers,' he answered.

'Samplers?'

'Victorian embroidery,' the toothless one informed me, still vigorously sewing.

'For Mother's Day on Sunday,' added the other.

'I see,' I said, bending over them to get a closer look at their work. 'May I see?'

'Can't be stopping,' said the toothless one, continuing to sew with great determination, forcing the needle savagely through the canvas. 'Got to get it finished.' He turned to his friend. 'Pass us t'pink will tha, Dean?'

His companion searched through the assortment of coloured threads. 'All gone,' he replied bluntly.

'All gone!' exclaimed the toothless boy. 'All gone! Tha's gone and used all t'pink?'

'I needed it for mi roses.'

'And tha's used all t'purple, an all?'

'That were for mi lilac.'

'And t'yella'

'That were for mi daffs,' said the large boy apologetically.

'And tha's left me wi all t'blacks and t'browns and t'greys. Thanks very much, Dean!'

The boys, entirely oblivious of my presence, resumed pushing the large needles through the fabric as if their lives depended upon it.

'Just stop a moment, will you, please,' I told them.

The toothless one paused, looked up, wiped the dewdrop from his nose with the back of his hand and then returned to his sewing as if he had not heard me.

'I can't stop,' he told me. 'I've got to gerrit done.'

His companion, clearly very pleased with his effort, held up a pale square of cream fabric. In large, uneven letters were the words: A MOTHER'S LOVE IS A BLESSING

The border was ablaze with a whole host of large, unrecognisable but extremely vivid flowers.

'I've just got mi name to put at t'bottom and I'm all done,' he announced proudly.

'And tha's used up all t'pink,' grumbled his companion, who was still stitching away madly.

The large boy straightened his sampler with a fat, pink hand and admired his handiwork before asking, 'Are you one of these school inspectors Miss was on about?'

'I am,' I replied.

'What do you reckon to mi sampler, then?'

'Well, it's very bright and original but, you know, if I had come into your school a hundred years ago, you'd have been in real trouble.'

'How old are you, then?' asked the toothless boy.

'What I meant is that if a school inspector had visited your school at the time it was built, you would have been in trouble.'

'Why's that then?'

'Because your stitches are too big. If you look at the Victorian samplers, you will notice that the lettering and designs are very delicate and very carefully stitched.'

The toothless boy stopped sewing abruptly, examined his sampler and carefully put down his needle and thread, before turning to look me straight in the face. 'Aye, well, if I did `em small and delicate like you say, mi mum'd nivver gerrit, would she? I've been on this for four week and I'll be lucky to get it done for next year's Mother's Day, way things stand.'

'I'd get mine done,' Dean chimed in smugly.

'Aye!' snapped the toothless one. 'And we know why, don't we?'

'Why?' I asked.

'Because, when Miss give out all these different Victorian sayings and proverbs, I was off poorly and when I got back I was stuck wi' t'one nobody wanted. Dean got shortest - A MOTHER'S LOVE IS A BLESSING - and I got t'longest!' He displayed his piece of fabric with a grubby finger. It read:

THERE IS NOTHING SO PURE, THERE IS
NOTHING SO HIGH, AS THE LOVE YOU
WILL SEE IN YOUR MOTHER'S EYE.

'I've only just started mi border,' he moaned. 'And Dean's used all t'pinks and t'yellas and t'purples and I'm stuck wi' t'blacks, t'browns and t'greys!'

'You could do animals instead of flowers,' suggested his companion with a self-satisfied smirk on his round red face. 'You don't need colours for sheep and cows and goats...'

'I'd need summat for t'pigs, though, wouldn't I?' cried the toothless one. 'And tha's used all t'pink!'

'I'm sure that, however it turns out, your mother will love your sampler,' I reassured him.

'If she gets it!' he barked.

'Well, I may see you boys later,' I said moving away.

`Later?'they exclaimed in unison.

`I thought I'd pop into the Singing class during the lunch-hour,' I told them.

`Singing!' the toothless one exclaimed. `Singing! We don't gu to no Singing class! That's for t'cissies!'

The other boy, putting the finishing touches to his large pink rose, nodded in agreement before echoing his companion's sentiments: `Aye, choir's for t'cissies and t'lasses. You wunt catch us ther.'

As I headed to another desk, I heard a plaintive cry from the comer table, `Miss, miss, can I have some pink thread, please? We're clean out ovver `ere!'