

AN AFTERNOON WITH A CLOTHES MANGLE

I don't know why I'm telling you this, you couldn't possibly be interested in my story. Here I am parked in an outhouse because they didn't know what to do with me. Once I was part of the household, the laundry of the big house, and one of the mangles used to squeeze moisture from the many sheets and towels that were washed in the concrete tubs. In the corner of the laundry stood a copper used for boiling the linen after it had been soaked in salt water to loosen the blood on sheets brought down in baskets from the bedrooms. The house had in turn been used as a brothel, a maternity hospital, a school and a nursing home.

The copper was set in bricks and the water was heated by chopped wood brought in by the towel boy, the boy who used to collect the personal towels used by the girls after a session with each gentleman and later by those used by the incontinent. Sometimes the towels were not big enough and the sheets had to be changed as well. The laundry was most active when servicing the nursing home when sheets had to be changed daily.

So as you can guess the laundry was a hive of activity, with the young girls supervised by a tigress of a woman, who stalked them as they washed the linen by hand. However there was a dolly, a contraption used to jerk the clothes about in a large tub when a piece had to be washed vigorously because it was so badly stained. A washboard was also used, a corrugated metal sheet with wooden sides.

When all the whites were thoroughly washed and rinsed in two changes of water, they were soaked for a while in Ricketts blue bags to emphasise their Pristine whiteness. Some of the garments worn by the household were starched, some in rice water. Then I and another mangle came into play, the sheets and towels fed through our rollers with laundry maids taking it in turn to turn our handles. The flattened linen was collected in baskets and taken to the yard to dry on clothes lines, supported by props. Too bad when it rained, they had to wait to go outside. Some were dried in front of a big black leaded range, fuelled by wood, and others rigged up on overhead lines, drawn up by a pulley. The steam in the laundry was enough to choke a black as the girls said. The steam was good for the girls' complexions.

Everyone in the laundry worked hard, their hands red and rough with the work but on the whole they were a happy bunch, singing and whistling. A favourite went as follows

*'Twas on a Sunday morning
When I beheld my darling
She looked so neat and charming
In every high degree.
She looked so neat and nimble O,
A-ironing of her linen O,
Dashing away with a smoothing iron
Dashing away with a smoothing iron
She stole my heart away.....*

However the ironing was done in another part of the laundry and these laundry maids were specialists, using goffering irons, for collars and cuffs with their tiny pleats. Starched articles were damped down and rolled to distribute the moisture, then ironed with flat irons heated on the range with the goffering irons. Double damask tablecloths and napkins were washed and ironed after each dinner party.

The finished articles were taken upstairs to be placed in airing cupboards, ready for use.

During the war, when most women went to work in munitions factories which paid better wages, very young girls were employed to work in the laundry as well as other parts of the house. I felt sorry for the poor little things with their scrawny arms laboriously turning our handles.

After the war, when washing machines, dryers, and flat bed irons were brought into the house, our services were no longer required and just as well because my rubber rollers were perishing. Now I'm forgotten and I expect I will stay here until the house is requisitioned for a housing estate and I'll be snatched up by a scrap metal merchant, to be melted down for who-knows-what?

THE END