

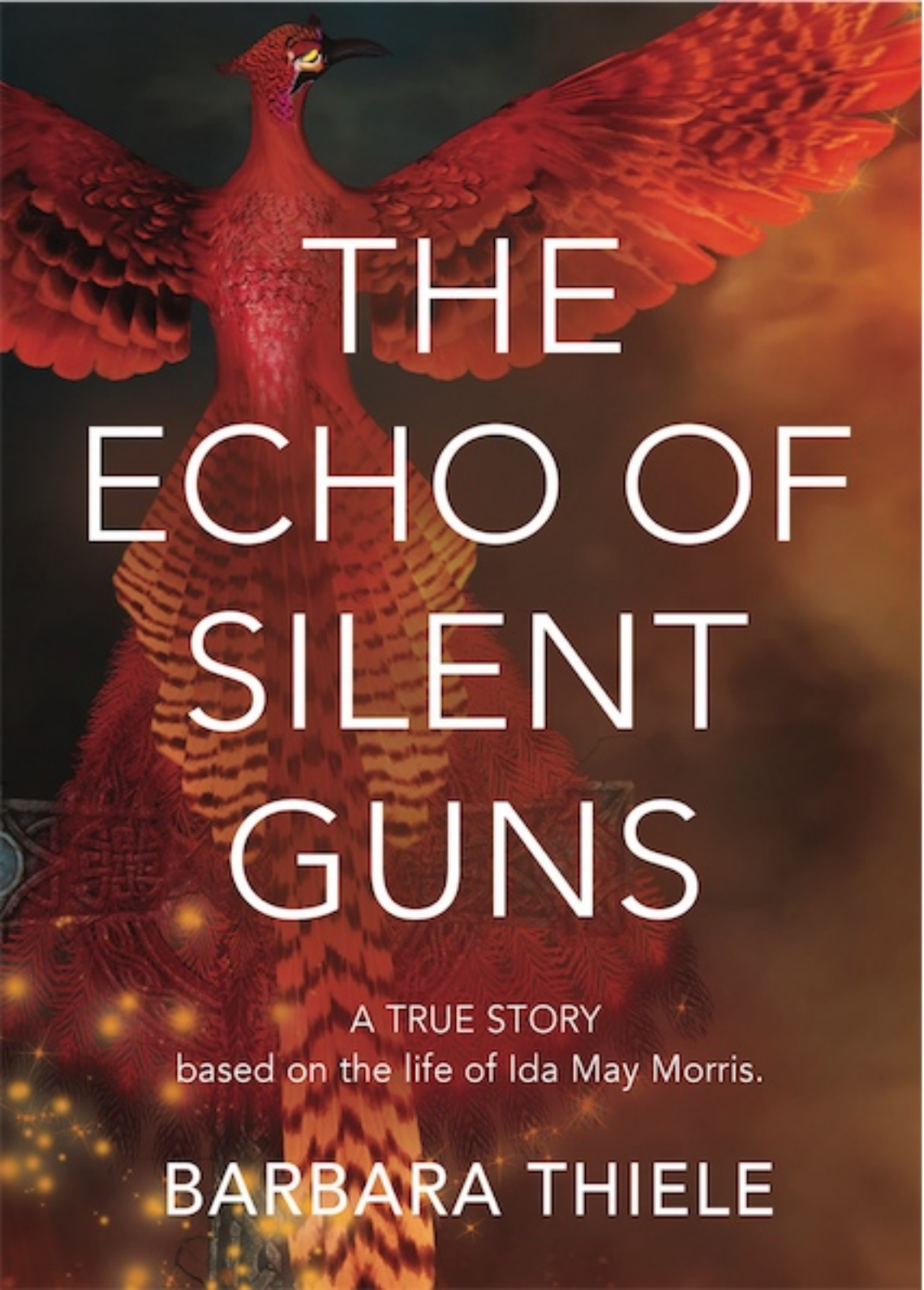
This courageous woman triumphs over the brutality of almost constant warfare throughout her life. After the loss of her husband William in WW1, she migrates to Australia with her family. The Korean war follows WW2, followed by the Vietnam war. Her story reveals the futility of warfare and the personal pain and loss inflicted on vast populations.

THE ECHO OF SILENT GUNS

by Barbara Thiele

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THE ECHO OF SILENT GUNS

A TRUE STORY
based on the life of Ida May Morris.

BARBARA THIELE

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DISCLAIMER

Most of the events in this book are based on the memoirs and letters of my grandmother or what I and relatives remembered and shared in their stories. I have tried to recreate events, locales, and conversations from my and others' memories of them. Some dialog is based on the known opinions of people involved and were not actually recorded or are from memories. In order to maintain anonymity or avoid name confusion, in some instances, I have changed some names.”

Chapter 1

23 Horsefair Street, Kidderminster 1916

Ida paced to the window, the fourth time in as many minutes, and tentatively fingered lace drapes opening a narrow slit, merely enough for her right eye to catch a hurried glance. To move the thin film of privacy any further would expose her to the outside world and, worse, to what lurked there: the awaiting menace. With a quick peek down to the street, she returned to her tiny kitchen for another cup of weak tea.

Her supplies dwindled daily, especially the rare black leaves that emitted their distinctive aroma when she opened her tea caddy. The silver Edwardian pot, Will's indulgent wedding gift, perched high on the shelf. A bit tarnished, it housed her collection of coins: several three-pennies, hay-pennies, even farthings, and her special sixpences. Her forgotten lucky bride sixpences remained from their wedding day when she dressed in white silk brocade and lace.

“Something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue, a lucky sixpence for your shoe,” they had sung. Her florins and shillings went yesterday to pay for the meagre supply of groceries.

Ida removed the lid from her battered tin caddy, imposed with images of King and Queen. Of little import to her today, she shook leaves, merely enough for the week if she rationed them out. Boiling water whistled in her kettle, swishing a small amount around in her old china teapot to heat it through, she added a scant teaspoon of “tay” as her mother called it. Before the war, Ida drank her tea strong and dark, with enough tannin to put an edge on teeth and tongue. Today, the customary ritual comforted her; she needed distraction, more than the drinking of the weak brew. Her yellow knitted tea cozy, now dressing the pot, would keep the brew hot for a little longer as she sat enclosed within herself.

“Oranges and lemons, say the Bells of St. Clement’s.”

Children’s voices, chanting their game, drifted through the kitchen window. Ida settled down with her back to the front door, sipping her hot liquid. *A spoonful of dark raw sugar*, she thought before reaching for her ration coupons, but, with fewer supplies on the shelves to buy, the yellow stubs for butter, lard, meat, and sugar meant nothing. The hated Germans, in their attempts to

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starve Britain into submission, used their submarines to sink ships carrying these valuable food items. A biscuit to dunk, a habit of the king so they said, usually sat snugly on her saucer, but the wheat rations...

The children continued their singing:

"You owe me five farthings, say the Bells of St. Martin's."

"When will you pay me? say the Bells of Old Bailey"

"When I grow rich, say the Bells of Shoreditch."

The incessant "*EEK, eek,*" of the mail carrier's rusty bicycle grew louder. She bunched her apron to her mouth and bit down hard, trying to suppress a sob; tears stung her eyes before hiccups erupted. Was today her turn to face that monster? He had prowled their streets for weeks now, targeting one household after another; one terrified woman followed another. He'd suck out their life's essence, steal souls then return the next day in broad daylight to pick off another victim, unmolested by husband, father, brother or protective militia.

"When will that be, say the Bells of Stepney?"

"I do not know, say the Great Bells of Bow."

The screeching grew even louder as the monster approached her door. While sobbing uncontrollably, she attempted to hold her breath and, instead, produced a moaning sound. The monster passed her door, the third time today.

“Here comes a candle to light you to bed.”

The grating noise grew fainter, as she collapsed onto the table with her head on her forearms, relieved he hadn't sought her today. No time for self-indulgence. Quickly washing her face of grief, she poured another cup of tepid tay. Then Ida heard screaming. It couldn't be Betty from next door, the monster had already taken her reason for living, her life. She quickly did an audit in her mind: who remained on her street? The devil had no preference for age groups, preying on the young and old alike. The more she tried not to listen to the mournful crying, the more she recognized Bridget's voice. He had had his way: his “*EEK, eek*” grew loud again as the predator quickly rode past her door. He'd accomplished his day's damage, fleeing back to the sanctuary of his lair.

Her nervous thoughts cascaded: *God help me, I'm relieved it's not me. I should go to her. I can't. I should. She'll know I'm glad he chose her and not me. If I don't go, the whole town will talk about me. I must go to help. I'll help with the children. I can't go. William would want me to go. I'll remove my apron, comb my hair, and go. I'll take a pot of tay. Oh, Dear God, her children are here with me in the back garden.*

“Here comes a Chopper to Chop off your Head.”

“Chip chop, chip chop – the Last Man's Dead.”

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Ida jabbed hat pins into her hat as she looked out the window at the playing children, then at the dark clouds scurrying across the sky. All morning, the foreboding gloom had added to her melancholy, but so far, the rain held off. With a quick decision to leave the children for a short time, she discarded her pinafore and rushed out the door to Bridget's house across the street. Bridget, like other wives in the village who had attempted to carry on their husbands' businesses, took over the bakery when her husband left. Weevily flour came in short supply. Regardless, she managed to bake bread at least twice a week, always in the morning to lessen the strain on the power supply. Fred Wiggins had a reputation for his baked goods, especially at Easter: hot cross buns, egg-rich yellow, loaded with currants, smelling of yeast. Now she baked War bread. To ensure an adequate supply, the government regulated admixtures of barley oats, or rye to the flour, resulting in a darker, heavier bread.

Ida took a deep breath as she let herself into the small shop. Bridget screamed and gasped, her keening emotional pain transformed to physical aching, stealing her breath. Squatted on the floor and covered in flour, she rocked herself backwards and forwards while kneading soft dough through her fingers. Ida took in the clouded scene before her, quickly covering her nose to breathe. Bridget ripped off pieces of dough, absently

piling them in her lap, before scooping up more flour to throw across the room. As her tears mingled with fine white powder, lumps of sticky paste formed on her ample chest and her once beautiful auburn hair appeared prematurely aged to a dull gray.

“Oh, Bridget dear, what news? What have you heard?”

“He’s dead, he’s dead. Those Germans murdered my Fred.”

Ida slipped in flour as she attempted to comfort Bridget. As the two of them sprawled across the floor, they clutched each other, the pain of the situation too immense to bear. For Bridget, the reality of her ever-present foreboding had materialised. Ida had envisioned her own nightmare so many times, she vicariously took on Bridget’s horror. Together, they lost control, crying, gasping, and sobbing.

“That monster, Claude Bailey just thrust this letter in my hands and took off on his screeching bicycle. Didn’t speak a word; just off he went. Aw, Ida, what do I do now?”

Her eyes met Ida’s imploringly; Ida had no immediate answer, still absorbed in her own nightmare that had devoured her reason. Bridget continued her screaming, absently picking up flour and dumping it on

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her already white head: precious costly flour, now no longer of any value.

Ida retrieved torn pieces of the letter Bridget had shredded. Once patched together, she read, Bridget's name and address headed a typewritten form.

'I'm sorry to inform you that.... your husband.... was in the front line when the Great German Offensive started and, since then, I have heard nothing of him. I trust news may soon be received that he is well, although he is probably in enemy hands. Please accept the sympathy of myself and the other officers of the Battalion in your time of great anxiety. Lt. Col commanding 28th BN

"They didn't even put his name in. Just ... *your husband*..." Bridget said, now wailing.

"Take heart, dear. It doesn't say he's killed. Missing it says. Do you hear, missing? There's still hope." Ida attempted to find the bright side but knew, as did Bridget, going missing in the battle of the Somme probably meant death.

Through sobs, Bridget said, "They didn't say his name. They didn't even say his name."

"His name is Fred. Do you hear me? His name is Fred, Fred Wiggins, Fred Wiggins. He's my husband, the father of my children, Doris and George."

Bridget screamed at the ceiling, “His name is Fred Wiggins!” She scrunched her pinafore to her mouth to stifle her sobbing.

Ida felt paralyzed, unable to utter any appropriate words of comfort. She patted Bridget’s hand and stroked her flour-dusted arms. Bridget’s hair had fallen out of her chignon. Ida tenderly brushed it behind her ears.

“I hate Claude Bailey. The crippled monster skulks in the shadows when he’s not riding his rusted out old bike. Won’t look anyone in the eye. They should send him to the front, him and his club foot. Now, he just brings misery to them of us left behind.”

Ida admitted to herself, she shared the same reaction to Claude Bailey. How many times had she crossed the street to avoid looking him in the eye? She couldn’t stand going anywhere near him. All women knew that his news was contagious. She clung tenaciously to Bridget, both sobbing and hiccupping. Ida noticed mice scurrying around the open sacks of flour, enjoying manna falling after Bridget’s hysteria. The box of badges printed “I EAT LESS BREAD” and their accompanying certificates from the Director of Food Economy lay scattered. How long ago? Last year, she remembered Bridget attending the National Bakery School, designed for women to bake, to keep up a steady supply of bread.

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Only last week, Bridget fussed over the gov'ment regulations, too complicated for her to manage.

"They want me to sell stale bread just to put people off eating. I remind customers to chew slowly. Eat only when you're starving. You don't hear about them rich folk going hungry," Bridget scoffed.

Bridget followed Ida's gaze to the badges. "My wee Georgie ate coupons last week, Ida. If I don't do the coupons proper, they can fine me or send me to prison."

Judging from her apparent distress, the task taxed her abilities. Bridget and her children couldn't cope in Fred's absence any better than other women left to fend for themselves. Ida closed her mind to the future for this little family. The chaotic scene littered before her, made her doubt her own.

"Then, with the shortage of sugar, how am I expected to get the yeast to rise? They're suggesting vinegar instead of baking powder for my cakes. Poor Fred would roll over in his grave." The mention of Fred in his grave set her off again. "If I go to prison, what will happen to my bairns," she wailed. "My bairns, where are my bairns?"

"They're playing with Daisy and Billy. Hush now. Hush." Ida said.

The door flung open violently. A strong gust of rain-drenched wind swept into the room sending certificates

and flour airborne again. Three massive women from the neighborhood rushed in, quickly closing the door against the cold.

Ida immediately recognized them, dressed appropriately, according to the etiquette of mourning, in their widow's weeds. All wore black weeping veils attached to their hats and severe black dresses as prescribed by none other than Her Royal Highness, Queen Victoria herself. *The black death personified*, thought Ida, but gave a relieved welcoming smile on their arrival. Bertha stooped to help the women from the floor. All corseted in whalebone and encumbered with yards of fabric, bending, slipping, and arising became a pantomime. Bridget, the previous minute crying hysterically, laughed out of control as if drunk.

"She needs a good cup of tea," Martha said.

"Laced with whiskey," Millicent suggested.

Martha quickly assessed the room. She grabbed a broom, and began the cleanup of billowing flour, then smashed as many mice as possible with the hard straw, before they fled under floorboards. At this stage of the war effort, women no longer relied on old tomcat for rodent extermination; these stalwarts embraced the task. Now that the professionals had arrived, Ida discretely took the opening to go check on the children; no one noticed her slip out, as they had jobs to do. These

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women, widows themselves, while attempting to deal with unbearable sorrow of their own, banded together to care for their sisters when death came a knocking. The sense of contributing help gave them a purpose when all else had been stripped from them.

Rain swept wind whipped at her clothing, forcing Ida to bend into its power. She clutched her shawl and hat, which had remained on her head throughout the drama. Ida disconnected the doorbell of the shop on her whirlwind entry and hung the "SHOP CLOSED" sign; there would be no more customers today.

Soaked to the bone, the children laughed, pushed, and sang.

"It's raining it's pouring,

The old man is snoring.

He bumped his head

On the end of the bed

And couldn't get up in the morning."

Leaving Bridget to Martha and Bertha, Millicent appeared in Ida's kitchen. Rushing into each other's arms, the two of them clung together.

"Oh Milley, I'm so worried about Will. I haven't heard a word for weeks. He took a few cards with him when he left. I know he would try to send one if he could."

“Ida, our army is fighting in hell. The government deliberately limits the stories, keeps information from us. From what I hear, our soldiers are trying to stay alive and kill a few Germans at the same time—”

Ida interrupted, “Will couldn’t kill a cockroach let alone another man. Killing’s always been my job.”

“I know, I know,” Milley said. “All our menfolk are the same, now they find themselves in abhorrent circumstances...” She shook her head, with nothing else to add.

The children ran in, shivering from the cold into the arms of the women who wrapped them in the nearest towels, scrubbing hard to warm them.

“I’ve got an idea,” said Millicent, “why don’t you children come over to my house to eat supper with me? I have honey for toast.”

“Honey,” said Daisy. Her mouth turned to a grim pout. “We don’t see honey anymore. We even eat jam made with salt. It’s horrible.”

“Come on then—I have dry clothes for you all—quickly before bees come to claim it back.”

Milley raised her chin at Ida. With a parting nod said, “Pull yourself together, Ida. We’ve a long way to go before...”

Ida slumped into the nearest chair, a turmoil of emotions. *Did she rudely admonish me? Am I a child to*

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be chastised? How dare she disregard my tremblings, my pain. Pull myself together indeed. She picked up a wooden toy of Billie's and threw it across the room. The little red wheels fell off, rolling to her feet. *Don't let the wheels come off your wagon?* she mused.

Rain poured heavily now in sheets of water cascading from the roof, bypassing the gutters altogether. A brief respite from children settled her briefly, except for the squalling winds outside, angrily thrashing branches against the window. Loneliness rushed in again, taking her unawares. *Oh Will, how much longer? I feel like an empty shell. I'm projecting too far forward. If I'm so susceptible to others' mourning, how will I cope when you're at the front? Perhaps you won't have to go at all.* She breathed deeply and grudgingly agreed to do as Milley suggested.

The meat room beckoned, always the meat room. *Pull yourself together, Ida. Pull yourself together.* A solitary side of beef hung suspended from a steel hook alongside a few sheep bodies. Leftover trimmings of fat, gristle and meat saved for sausages clumped in a bin ready for the mincing machine. The more meat she dressed for sale, the more money she had for food for herself and her extended family.

She picked up a cleaver and, raising it above her head, hacked down into the neck bones of sheep. The

heavy broad blade descended with a mighty swing again and again. The resident butcher grabbed one carcass after another and chopped until a pile of bones threatened to cascade off the block. Mincing a bin of leftover trimmings into sausage meat followed. Thankfully, the Industrial Co-op Society supplied them with meat in whole sides of beef, mostly frozen imports from South America, but the prized lamb and mutton came from local farms. Other shops in Kidderminster bought their meat on the hoof, alive and bellowing, awaiting slaughter. Their little shop had neither space nor a yard to deal with live belligerent bulls.

Spent from her blitz, Ida swept hair from her face with her forearm then flopped onto a stool. Sawdust on the floor hid most of the surplus fragments of bone and she resigned herself to the task of raking the pieces, no one else would volunteer today. Feeling defeated, Ida sat eyeing the scarce supply of meat still to be cut into select pieces. Will had gloated with pride with the abundant Canterbury lamb legs and chops, aged rolled beef roasts, the cutlets he'd hung on display. Now, she groaned as the vat of beef tripe delivered earlier caught her eye. During her pregnancies with Billy and Daisy, Ida had to contribute to the running of their shop by crumbing chops and stringing sausages. She especially loathed bleaching tripe, which resulted in frequent runs to the

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privy with just enough time to heave. Today the remembered reflective response made her gag. Green tripe described not only the color of honeycomb structure of the cow's stomach but also meant untreated meat. Green, undigested feed in the four compartments of the stomach has an odor all its own. Ida grabbed a huge lump of the yellowish muck and slopped it on the block.

Taking Wills steel, holding it at arms-length and the knife at an angle with slight pressure, she moved the blade from the bolster to point, starting one side of the steel then the other. Will did this so many times a day as part of the routine, insisting on sharp knives. Ida carefully cut off all unwanted fat, by sliding the blade of her knife over the surface. Any other foreign matter also surrendered to the blade. She scooped a good handful of rock salt from the salt box and rubbed it into the tripe, followed by a rinse with vinegar, then a repeat of the process until no visible signs of impurities lingered. The treatment kept her busy for an hour and left her hands raw and chapped. After a good scrub with an old toothbrush to remove any residual dirt and grit from the crevices, another clump of yellow stomach landed on the block. Home cooks would further treat the tripe by washing, then boiling for a couple of hours to render the tripe chewable.

Will hand painted advertisement read, “TRY OUR LAMPREDOTTO”

Their customers knew nothing of Lampredotto.

“I think this might get our friends interested in buying more tripe,” he’d said.

“Not many Italians in Kidder. How about we give recipes as well?”

“Looks like lamprey eels,” declared one of his old-timers. “But it’s just old tripe.”

“Exactly,” said Will. “Couldn’t fool you ‘ay, Harold?”

How Will knew about Italian recipes, Ida never found out, but she listened closely as he explained how to pass on the recipe to customers.

“Boil, boil, boil the cow’s guts before making a white sauce with a big bunch of chopped up parsley until the dish turns green,” he said.

Ida suggested they sell tripe in its original condition in that case. Organs of animals sold more quickly than other prime cuts as the pluck required fewer coupons to cover the price, a major factor in these times of scarcity. Indeed, the nose to tail of animals and all quarters in between, ended up on the block, either chopped, sliced, cured, or smoked. Mincing of remaining, mysterious pieces left nothing to waste, not even the fat. Though most customers added home-grown herbs to augment or

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camouflage flavors, Will still put bunches of parsley and mint on his counter as an incentive giveaway.

All the villagers loved Will. He had a joke and a laugh with everyone, though several enjoyed his homemade black pudding sausage even more. Locals came weekly for an order of this delicacy: made of mixed gruel stirred in clotted blood. Will kneaded the oatmeal, rye flour, and blood together with his bare hands along with his secret spice concoction. While puffing on his cigarette, he'd put a tubular animal intestine end to his mouth and blow the bloody gruel mixture into casings while kneading it along the lengths. With a quick twist or two of the tube six inches apart, he'd produce a string of sausages which hung in the shop like a garland.

His mentor and friend Bruno Schulte of Birmingham kept up a steady supply of casings: thoroughly cleaned intestines of all animals, pigs, cows, sheep, and even horses, which arrived weekly on ice.

Ida stabbed the point of her knife into the block, before wiping her greasy, cud covered hands on her apron. She arched her back to ease the cramping and looked around the shop littered with animal parts: bloody liver, brains, other offal. She fleetingly wished for her old job in the carpet factory. True, her back ached from a long day of standing, picking over the carpet for loose threads and imperfections; conversely, at least she

didn't smell like cow dung. Ida had read in one of her precious books where Shakespeare had described a damned rascal as tripe-visaged. She'd nodded to herself, picturing his pockmarked rogue.

After more back stretching, Ida did a cursory clean up although scrubbing the meat block with a strong wire brush was mandatory. Syd, her brother, usually took care of cleanup. She briefly felt the pang, remembering his jovial face. She scrubbed her hands, rinsed her forearms in frigid water then retreated to her kitchen again. On Will's next leave from the barracks, they would hand back the shop to the Co-op. What butcher remained in the town to run it? So many had died already.

Chapter 2

1900. Time of Innocence.

As early as half-past eight on the morning of the second Saturday in July, the day promised to be warm, and Ida felt the heat on her already flushed cheeks. Her sixteenth birthday on the sixteenth, signified a coming of age, a tentative toe into adulthood. Her head spun with daydreams: where would life take her, away from Kidder, perhaps to Wolverhampton? She spent an hour arranging her strawberry blond tresses, she clutched her hat to her chest, not wanting to flatten her curls. Ida ignored her brother's sarcastic inquiries.

“Ay, where do you think you’re hurrying off to? They’re not gonna put your face on postcards, ya know, Ida May Hodgkinson.”

More out of habit than need, she modestly wrapped a lightweight shawl around her slender shoulders before rushing out the door. Her mother's voice of advice rung in her ears. “*You’re a young lady now; walk like one,*

back straight chin up.” She walked sedately down Northumberland Ave. Two streets over, she knocked on the door of No.14, the house of Mr. Bridges, the artist. Her excitement at having her portrait painted today mingled with the bubbly feeling she felt when Mr. Bridges smiled at her. This confusing emotion began the first time she sat beside his easel. Turning sixteen, a milestone to celebrate, warranted a portrait her parents decided, regardless of a modest expense.

Mr. Bridges, the tall, good-looking older man, attempted to make a living by painting portraits of well-to-do ladies. Their daughters like Ida twitted and giggled at the mention of his name. Mr. Bridges cultivated his clientele by word of mouth: mothers and daughters flocked for birthday portraits, or just because. Ida’s parents, however, couldn’t claim high birth from the upper crust. Her father, a starcher in the carpet mill, earned a low wage mixing glue to the back of carpets to hold woolen threads in place. Their eldest daughter’s image needed to be captured they reasoned before the harsh life of a factory worker marred her beauty.

A woman carrying a baby opened the door and said, “Ida, you’re right on time. Come in. My husband is waiting for you.” Another thumb sucker hid behind her skirts.

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Husband? No one told me he was married. A pang of betrayal clutched her heart. All those delicious imaginings evaporated as she bobbed her head, forcing a smile at the drooling little child.

Mr. Bridges appeared behind his wife and bent to kiss his baby.

He smiled at Ida and said, "Come into my so-called studio, Ida. I'm ready for you." When he steered her by the elbow into a small anteroom near the kitchen, an electric shock ran up her arm.

He took the portrait from his easel; as he held it up to brighter light, they both turned their heads from side to side, scrutinizing his work. The familiar bubbly feeling arose from her stomach again and shot up to the back of her throat.

"Your hair is beautiful, Ida. Observe closely how I put highlights on each curve of your curls. I wanted to catch light shining from the window."

Her cheeks flushed as he continued complimenting her periwinkle blue eyes. He picked up a brush as she settled in the model's chair trying not to fidget. She watched the artist mix a small amount of crimson with a peachy color before layering deeper pink on the lips of her image. *Looks as if I'm wearing lipstick.*

Her initial sitting had turned out to be more than wonderful as she had hoped. Mr. Bridges chatted about

her friends: asked questions, pushed a curl into place, pulled another down to her jawline. No other adult had paid her so much attention, and she had fallen in love. *Now he has a grubby little baby.*

Mr. Bridges stood back studying his painting with a frown. Not happy with his masterpiece, he put finishing touches on the necklace he'd painted around her throat: a little red on the faux rubies. Theatrically, he signed his name with a flourish.

"This needs to dry and mature, so come by on Wednesday. I'll wrap it ready for you." He said, smiling again.

Unrequited love at sixteen can be painful. To her credit, she brushed her slight aside as the silliness of a child. A young woman of sixteen has no need for such foolishness.

Determined not to embarrass herself nor belie her feelings, Ida thanked him and rushed out the door. She smashed her hat onto her head, cramping the curls with the golden sunlit highlights. Her blue eyes flashed. How could she be so stupid? Now, onto her next appointment for Saturday afternoon. She set off to her banjo-mandolin lesson with Mr. Walker: all of five feet six inches tall and fifteen stone. Mr. Walker engendered no romantic notions in Ida. She loved him, however, like a grandfather. He frequently played duets with her as his

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style of teaching and they laughed, played and sang together. She religiously practiced her chords between lessons to be ready for his challenges.

One block from Mr. Walker's home, the horrible thought hit her. She had left her banjo case at Mr. Bridge's. Drat, she had to go back to face him again. As she walked up the stoop, the door opened, Mrs. Bridges stepped out even before Ida could knock. The woman gave her a knowing smile before handing her the instrument case. Did that mean, *I know you're a forgetful child, or I know you love my husband, like all the girls?* Ida dare not wonder. She suspected the latter. She took the case in both hands, and quickly ran back down the steps, halted, straightened her back, held her head high, remembering to walk gracefully like a young lady. Mrs. Bridges smiled to herself as she closed the door. Ida turned the corner, now out of sight of the Bridges, she clutched her hat as she ran to the Walker house. Accustomed to letting herself in, Ida flopped down at the kitchen table gasping for breath.

"Sorry I'm late, Mr. Walker, I forgot my case."

Mrs. Walker raised her eyebrows, smiled while shaking her head.

"Here you are, love; I mixed your hot cocoa all ready for you. No egg in it this time," the older lady said. Ida lowered the corners of her mouth, grimacing with

exaggerated distaste at the thought. This ritual of Mrs. Walker's making hot cocoa in all seasons had started with using her own mother's ancient recipe. Initially, Ida had watched her dissolve cut up chunks of chocolate in a mixture of milky water. Mrs. Walker whisked up egg yolk until it frothed then poured the mixture into milk beating furiously with her moulinette. Never having seen a moulinette before, Ida examined the tool curiously.

"This belonged to my mother. It's the only remaining part of a special pot she used to make hot chocolate," Mrs. Walker explained, "I'm supposed to put sack in it, but you're too young to drink wine." So, she added a teaspoon of sugar, not enough for the young girl's tastes. Unfortunately, even with meticulous preparation, the mixture curdled.

"Oh dear, I think the milk was too hot. Now we have chocolate scrambled eggs. Mother used to do this so well: a chocolate custard almost, or a posset she called it."

This morning, Ida sniffed the hot drink, blew into the mug, took a sip, then a swig. "Just enough sugar." She smiled and ran her tongue through a mustache of richness, determined to retrieve the last morsel.

The woman beamed as if she'd offered the nectar of life. "Chocolate production started hereabouts almost 70 years ago. I'll bet you didn't know that. Luckily for you,

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they stopped the practice of others who added brick dust to bulk up the mixture. Otherwise, Ida, you would crunch on a nice mouthful of grit to add to your sugar.”

Smelling chocolate, Mr. Walker entered. “Ah, you’re here, young lady. I’m anxious for your good report today.”

Ida retrieved a book from her case and handed it back to him. She knew little about this loving older couple, nothing about their history, where they had come from initially, or their finances. What child had any understanding about such matters? How he had such an extensive library of old editions or modern publications escaped her curiosity. Her imagination lay in the plots: the intriguing fantasy of the many books he lent her each week. The review before another tome walked out the door, to hear his input, his perspective, proved as engrossing as the original read.

Mr. Walker saw such promise in this young girl; their mutual enjoyment of time together, more than covered the cost of his tutoring. His wife knew her parents a little but he asked nothing more for these weekly sessions of literature appreciation, as he called it. The banjo playing: icing on the cake for them both. His wife interrupted, asking about Ida’s mother and family.

“We’re all busy with the twins, Gladys and Daisy. Mother gets little sleep at night as they always cry. They

cry a lot. Trissie and I help when we can, but now that we're both working at the carpet, mother swooshes us both to bed to get our own rest." She prattled on. "Trissie sits at her drawings all her spare time. She wants to be a carpet designer. That Syd, what a little imp, always causing mischief. He follows Alfie everywhere, usually into trouble." Ida smiled at the thought of chubby little Syd.

She slurped on her hot cocoa, enjoying the focus of the Walkers' attention, contrary to the milieu of her own boisterous family where no one asked her opinion about anything. Mr. Walker impatiently watched the two talking, waiting to jump in with his own questions as soon as they inhaled.

"What did you think of Sir Arthur's story? I think you are ready for more adult books after reading all the children's books I offer." Mr. Walker waved his arm across the vast shelves of his library. "After we digest these mysteries, we'll move on to Dickens."

"I read *Great Expectations* last month, but I need help with your expert tutelage," she said, both knowing a little flattery goes a long way. The Walkers eyed her expectantly. Mrs. offered her a shortbread.

"Mr. Bridges said he liked my Grecian nose." Ida searched the ceiling vacantly as a muse. She ran her finger down her nose as if mimicking Mr. Bridges and

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said, "He painted my cupid's bow lips with rose pink, he called it. Looks like I'm wearing lipstick." The thought of lipstick, worn only by hussies, sounded quite scandalous, but without a doubt, their young friend relished the idea.

Mr. Walker frowned at his wife, mouthing "cupid's bow?"

Mrs. Walker's cautious instincts were alerted. She had noticed this tall angular child mature into a comely young woman during their weekly visits together,

"How many more sittings do you need still with this Mr. Bridges dear?" she asked, feigning innocence.

Ida gave a harrumph, saying, "None thank goodness. I'm finished with all that sitting around. Such a waste of time when I'm so busy with much to do. I'll pick up the painting next week."

Such a strong response but not knowing exactly what had transpired between this woman-child and the painter, Mrs. Walker felt her worries dissipate as it seemed the young girl's good sense had prevailed. Mr. Walker flicked through pages, and looked to his wife, noticing her relieved expression. *Methinks the lady protesteth too much*, he thought but said, "Let's move along now, ladies; I want to cover music and a book review today."

"Have you ever ridden a tandem bicycle, Mr. Walker?"

“No, not me, lassie; I fell off a penny-farthing once.”

She giggled, “Did you know there’s an Ida in this story?” She placed her palm lovingly, on the cover of the book. “She rode on a tandem with her beau. There’s a Mr. Walker in the story too?” Ida lent over to Mrs. Walker covering her mouth whispered in her ear. “The girls talked about their knickers.”

“Oh, my Lord,” said Mrs. Walker, gasping in mock horror.

“And they drank and smoked,” said Ida, widening her eyes.

“Mr. Walker,” his wife scowled at her husband saying, “is this really seemly for our young Ida to be reading?”

He fluttered his hand around in the air to dismiss the topic.

“But did you enjoy the book, Ida?”

“Oh yes, Mr. Walker. Their love for money and each other got all mixed up. It was too wicked. Nothing like dull old Kidder.”

“You think?” he sounded dubious. “Ida, I want you to learn, while reading is always informative and educational, it can be great fun.”

“I’m finding that out.” She nodded in agreement.

“Now we’re going to launch ourselves into more of Sir Arthur’s mysteries.” He handed her two more books,

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knowing her appetite exceeded more than the usual one per week. Ida's eyes danced up to all the books on the shelves, glad that she would forever lose herself in their world of truths, fiction, and faraway fantasy.

"Now let's hear how your skills improved after all your practice this week."

Ida confidently strummed several chords in rapid succession on her banjo, smiling at her old friend, almost as a challenge. Their Saturday's left a warm glow between them. As Ida said her goodbyes, Mrs. Walker gave her a little package of wrapped short-breads. "Take these to your Grandad Rennie."

"Grandad John is not in very good circumstances, I'm afraid. He hasn't done well since grannie Elizabeth died. He's a boarder with the Brown family over on Washington Road. Their six-year-old son Georgie is a rowdy little fellow, making Grandad distressed around him. Fortunately, he can't hear all that well." She shrugged. "I visit him most weekends when I can with Trissie. He's almost eighty now, you know. He loves to tell me stories of the carpet factory when he worked there as a weaver. When I told him, I had a job there too, he said, 'Welcome to the land of Axminster, Ida dear. All our family members made carpet. I was a Worsted man myself.'"

“Well child, so did all families ere since God knows when,” Mrs. Walker said. She chortled, remembering her own history.

“He’s still angry, so angry about the plight of workers, their treatment, following strikes, especially the one in 1853. He rioted with the rest of them,” Ida said. ““Them blighters robbed us without a care. They grew fat and rich off our backs. We lit a few fires, I can tell ya.’ He relished telling me about that one,” Ida said. Her voice imitated his accent and tone.

“He repeats his stories many times over and gets stuck right back there in the middle of it all. I nod and listen. I’m a bit scared about going into the mill myself. At least they’ll pay me. Grandad said in 1828, two thousand weavers struck for five months over the cutting of their wages from one shilling a yard to ten pence. That’s not right, Mrs. Walker.”

Mrs. Walker had concerns for her naïve young friend: the factory, its workers... indeed a dangerous place for a sixteen-year-old.

Chapter 3

Carpet Mill

Ida coughed then sneezed several times upon entering the Carpet Mill. Lint and dust in the air hung heavily, and where the light shone through the high windows, the tiny particles glistened, resembling flying mites. After a restless night of excited anticipation, she had risen at dawn to arrive early for her clock-in time of 7.00am. Her mother Clara had avoided giving Ida a warning of the situations about to confront her, like a mother loath to give a bride-to-be her pre-wedding-night instructions. The topic of sexual intimacy seldom came up in general conversation. How could Clara warn her innocent young child of the world of men into which she now ventured?

A ruddy-faced burly man stood at the entry to the Mill. Ida approached then bobbed to him. He then leered at her, up and down, with his piggy little eyes, saying, “And who might you be, my pretty?”

“Ida Hodgkinson, sir.”

He smirked at her for prolonged, lingering seconds before turning to a sheet, then shouted over his shoulder. "Oy, Ivy, 'ere's a new kid for ya."

He put his arm across her shoulders and steered her to where an equally large woman greeted her cheerily. "I'm Ivy, luv. I'm gonna teach you the trade." She raised her bushy eyebrows, chuckling at a joke only she understood.

"Do you have fires here," Ida asked, wide-eyed.

"Only most other weeks, then men piss on it instead of into the bins," she said, teasing Ida.

There must have been one recently, Ida figured, as the overwhelming smell of urine made her hold her breath before breathing in quick gasps through her mouth.

"You can smell it hey, luv? The smell is from bins over there." She gestured towards the side wall. "We got privies outside, but they use the piss for making dye for the carpet, so men use bins. Stinks around here, hey? The other smell mixed in is starch. They use starch for the backing of yarns. Sort of gets ya in the back of the throat, hey?"

"My dad is a starcher, so I'm familiar with that awful smell; regardless, you get used to it," Ida replied.

"Familiar, are we?" Ivy looked askance at her, putting on airs.

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“Well Miss Ida, let’s get to it, hey? So, your father’s a starcher. Everyone else here too, all our families works in carpet, hey? So, don’t expect any favors here, Miss Ida. Don’t matter to the boss upstairs who your family is. We do see a favor system of sorts amongst the workers if you want to get promoted. You’ll find out how soon enough, pretty thing like you, hey?” Ida strained to hear Ivy talk above the din of weaving looms, while still holding her breath against the reek of the bins.

“These here are your weaver tweezers. You might want to call it a burler, though. Your job will be a picker right here next to me, hey? The carpet rolls over these rollers, which I moves on with this here pedal. As it goes along we search for things which shouldn’t be there, like burls, slubs, loose threads, and anything else what shouldn’t be there. I stop the machine so’s we can trim threads with these scissors or pull out defective yarn. These ones what stick up stiff like, I call Johnnies. Where there’s a hole, I call them Jennies.” She looked at Ida for her reaction to the innuendo, then shrugged. “I reweave these mis-picks, puttin’ in pile or tufts using this needle. See this ‘ere? That’s called spile, a bit like grass still left behind. Here’s where you use your little weaver tweezers. I don’t want you slowing me down, hey? We work fast ‘cause I gets paid per yard, hey? By tomorrow, your dear little fingers will be sore.” She gave Ida a mock

smile of sympathy. When you grow a few callouses, it'll be easier."

From over Ivy's shoulder, Ida noticed an older man in his mid-thirties in the bin area. His eyes roved around to spot who watched, taking his time to put his private away. There it hung for all the world to gawk at. Ida stared, transfixed. Before she could turn away, he noticed her staring. After giving himself a last shake, he smiled at her and walked over to their station.

"Well, hello, Ivy, who's this pretty lass?"

"You get out'o here, Bert; she's too young for you."

"You wasn't, Ivy Smith." Bert puckered up and blew kisses to Ivy. He leered again at Ida before walking back to the weaving shed.

"Now a word of warning to you, Miss Ida, stay away from creelers and weavers. They just want to get inside your bloomers; you know, your drawers." She continued, "knickers, hey? The biggest danger around here isn't fire but falling, falling in the family way, hey?"

Ida wondered about creelers while still struck dumb since Johnny and Jenny. She had three sisters and four brothers, Ida knew all about "in the family way" or thought she did. Admittedly, a few major steps in between still eluded her; now, to be exposed to such open crudeness? *Well I never*, she thought to herself with a subtle toss of her golden curls. The women working

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around her smiled, friendly like. They talked to her when they had to, but Ida couldn't understand how their talk amongst themselves, if not about creelers, centered on weavers, starchers, stackers, and all other men in the Mill. When the whistle blew for her to down tweezers, she bolted.

Ivy said, "Well, goodbye to you too, Miss Familiar," smiling to herself.

Ida had to hold her belly running home as the pain almost made her vomit. She had been holding on all day, avoiding having a drink, although dry dust scorched her throat. No way would she go anywhere near the privies so she decided, never to drink at the Mill ever. Once relieved, she confronted her mother.

"I'm never going back there again. Never, ever. It's loud like a... a... raging storm. The smell is appalling; the people, the people are disgusting. They expose themselves. Did you know about these people? They expose themselves. Did they do that when you worked there, Mum?" Not waiting for a response, she continued.

"I'll get callouses on my hands from handling the ridiculous tweezers weezers, or whatever they call them. Callouses, how can I play the banjo with more callouses. I already have them where I want them, not on all my other fingers... I'm not going back, and nobody's going

to make me.” Used to Ida’s outburst of indignation, Clara waited for her tirade to subside.

“What will you do, Ida dear? You must work. Strangely, her initial response wasn’t outrage at the pervert exposing himself but more to Ida’s not working. “We need the money around here. The twins will soon be eating solids.”

Ida looked at the chubby little girls. Daisy crawled over to her and pulled herself up by Ida’s skirt. Mother’s milk appeared to be working fine so far, so why do they need to go on to solids if they cost so much, anyway? She cupped Daisy’s little face in her hands and brushed her hair back. Distracted from herself, Ida had a flashback of when her father, as the breadwinner, was served the one and only egg for breakfast, to “keep up his strength,” her mother would say. He would then smash in the top of the egg and then show her the rich golden yolk. “No snot, mother; ya timed it right,” he always said. He’d cut his toast into fingers and give her a soldier, as he called them, to dip into his egg. As each subsequent child arrived, they all eagerly anticipated their soldier for breakfast dipped into his egg. She hadn’t wondered until now to question the unfathomable depth of golden yolk or how much of the egg her needy father had to savour. So many mouths to feed, Ida felt badly for her mother who bore the brunt of her frustrations.

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“I’ll work. I’ll become a minstrel. I can blacken my face with burnt cork and join the Christy Minstrels. I could become a star performer with my banjo-mandolin. They all play mandolins and banjos. I could even tell stories. I can make up a story in a snap.” She clicked her fingers in the air.

“Go change Gladys, dear. You can talk about this with your father tonight after he’s had his tea, not before, you hear?”

Ida pondered her plight anxiously, weighing up her perceived rights against obvious responsibilities until the after-tea time arrived. By then, the harsh reality of their lives had sunken in. Her reality stretched as a life in the carpet mill, not on the stage as a performer. She looked at her tired father as he ate; his breakfast egg came to mind again. She had bathed four naked brothers before. How hard could it be to ignore a man exposing himself? Perhaps she could talk more about it to her mother? No, clearly her mother didn’t want to talk of such things.

Ida could hear her parents mumbling after they all retired to bed. With so many of them in such a small house, doubled up in beds, head to toe, it wasn’t difficult to hear. While she couldn’t make out exact words, raised voices and the tone of the conversation suggested a hot topic, and she knew exactly who wore that hat tonight.

She trudged to the Mill the next morning without the spring in her step of yesterday. Her father had patted her on the head as she left. What consolation could he offer? They lived in a famous factory town, noted for carpet weaving; they all had jobs, and conditions had improved slightly since the last strike. They could strike again; they had power, although he knew the worker suffered more from striking than the mill owners ever did.

After about four weeks' training as a picker, Ida arrived at work, ready to greet her supervisor Ivy, only to be told by Mavis, another coworker, that Ivy wouldn't be at work for a few weeks, if at all. Her initial qualms centered on Ivy's welfare before she figured out that she'd be doing the Johnny and Jenny by herself. Mavis looked, waiting for the "penny to drop" as she called it at Ida's nonplussed face, and said, as if talking to an idiot, "She had her baby... Didn't you know?"

"I just thought she was fat. She used to complain about her bad back. But she wasn't even married, how come she was... you know?"

"Gees, girl, you sure got a lot to learn. Let me tell ya how it happens. When those weavers come around, offering you sweets, that's how. Those draw girls, who draw the warp yarn through the loom for the weavers, eat the most sweets of all. Even though the weavers are mostly married men, young draw girls quickly lose their

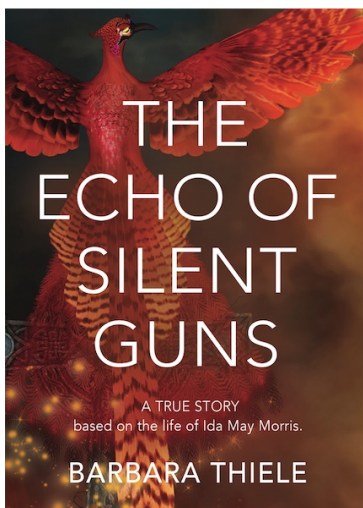
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drawers.” Mavis shook her head at Ida. She walked away, laughing at her own clever pun.

Confused and embarrassed at her ignorance, Ida decided to watch and learn, but keep her mouth shut. Although she seldom saw her father in her part of the factory, she recognized many neighbors, and their families all working at separate locations. The men worked for long twelve-hour shifts, back to back, together with wives and their adult unmarried daughters, who wound bobbins. Even their children worked as draw boys and girls. Draw boys, having a distinct advantage, served an apprenticeship before becoming a qualified weaver, girls destined to become pickers, or spinners never became full apprentices, which struck Ida as entirely unfair; girls could do anything the boys did.

She held a position of seniority and responsibility in her household as the eldest daughter; consequently, she felt empowered and her voice counted with the younger children. In the workforce here at Mill, the women laboured as hard as the men and boys, but their pay? This inequity stuck in her craw more than anything else. Why should men receive almost double the wages of women for doing the same work; why this preferential treatment? At the end of an apprenticeship, a male could receive half wages as a strictly supervised, half-weaver alongside his master, who could then work another loom.

This meant the male master got more work done and more pay, while women wouldn't have this chance to strive for master weaver status.



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