



Corsley

The Farthing Bundle Lady

A story about Clare Grant, born in 1867

One hundred years ago, on June 21st, 1867, Clare Grant, the eldest of a family of nine, was born in the Wiltshire village of Chapmanslade, the daughter of Thomas Grant, Organister, and Maria Grant. When she was seven years old her father closed their 'business' in the village and the family moved to Frome, where new premises were opened and her father was to become locally famous as organist and for his oratorio services and concerts. Of her earlier years in these two places she was later to write that she was "thankful she was born in a village" and had such a childhood that "counted so much in establishing impressions, habits, standards and relationships" and owed to it an interest for making intimate personal friendships that were later to stand her in good stead in achieving her two ambitions of becoming a teacher and to reside in the East End of London.

After five years of being educated in a Victorian "Seminary for Young Ladies" in Frome, she left to become a pupil teacher in Christ Church Infants School. While there she met and became engaged to a Mr. Sparks, a curate at the school, their plan being that he would go out to Zanzibar as a missionary and when he was settled she would join him and after marriage she intended to work together as missionaries. This work would have been ideal for both but it was not to be. Within six months her fiance contracted a fever and died. So Miss Grant decided instead she would "marry her work" and that would be among the poor in London's East End. She then spent two years at the Salisbury Diocesan Training College and afterwards took a head-teachership at Melksham for three years. But her ambitions of a life's teaching in London beckoned and so in 1890, at the age of 23, Clara Grant applied for and secured the post of teacher at an infants' school in Hoxton. At last she was "in the city of my dreams". At Hoxton she taught for nearly three years, then on the advice of an inspector of schools who considered her a promising teacher, she obtained a teaching post in a better-class Board School at Wapping, where she remained for five years. In 1900 she decided to move on again and applied for the head-teachership of a very small school in a then poverty-stricken area of London, Bow Common. Although there were more than fifty other applicants, being a local resident she was chosen. Here at Bow she was to do works of all kinds for which she is remembered in East London even today.

Terrible Working Conditions

She was appalled at the dreary conditions people were living in and upon becoming headmistress and moving into 38, Fern Street she endeavoured to personally assist those in need, turning the rooms of her house into a welfare centre. This reached such proportions that in 1907 she enlisted the help of Joseph Fels,

a local benefactor, and Richard Green, owner of a Blackwall shipping firm, to rent adjoining houses to make into the Fern Street Settlement, Clara Grant being the first Honorary Warden. Its main aim was to relieve distress and hardship among families in Bow, in particular help their children, totalling almost a thousand. The Settlement's activities included providing bread, butter and milk breakfasts at her school, loan of maternity bags to expectant mothers and cradle sales where they could buy cheap baby clothes, giving four handkerchiefs to each child on first day of term, an eye clinic, invalid food, thrift clubs for clothing, boots, spectacles, fire-guards and coal, helping and sometimes paying the debts of those involved with moneylenders, giving away unwanted wood, cardboard, etc., for the wives to burn in their washing copper fires, old pupils when brides or bridegrooms received a wedding parcel of china, linen, etc., and many other schemes and benefactions. At Christmas parcels of groceries, sweets, soap, toys and games, etc., were distributed to about seven hundred families or lonely or invalid people. Miss Grant also noted that the children were glad to play with any coloured pieces of paper, tins, boxes and suchlike, as toys were an impossible luxury for their parents to afford. So she devised her 'Farthing Bundles' scheme and persuaded friends, kindly shopkeepers and anyone interested to retain a "Bundle Box" or sack in which were saved discarded toys, trifles, pin cushions, ribbon, cards and items like gas mantle boxes that could be created into toys. When full the "Bundle Boxes" were sent to the Settlement to be put to good use. Gradually more well-wishers joined in the scheme. "Farthing Bundle Boxes" being returned from as far away as Italy, Greece, Fiji, Falkland Islands, New Zealand, Australia and U.S.A. The late Queen Mary used to send old toys from the Royal nurseries and on one occasion visited the Settlement. This Royal association has also been maintained with gifts from Queen Elizabeth, the Queen Mother and the Royal Duchesses and our Queen still takes an interest in the work of the Settlement and the 'Farthing Bundles' scheme.

Low arch to keep out those too tall

To teach the children the value of money and that life was not 'something for nothing,' Clara Grant decided that they should pay for the "Bundles" they received with the then lowest coin, a farthing. Also at first a ticket was required and the children wanting to take part had to write to Miss Grant for one each. Some of these letters, full of hope, asked "Will you send me a bundle ticket aged 8", "I am six years of age. I hope for the best", "Please send me a ticket as I like what is said about you", or "I am your sincere friend aged 4 ½ ." To ensure only young children took part in the "Bundles" scheme they had to walk under a four-foot high archway, on which was an inscription: "Enter all ye children small, None can come who are too tall". When the scheme was first started children arrived at 6 a.m. in the morning, summer and winter, to wait in all weathers, but it was decided to fix the time at 8 a.m., which was more convenient for the helpers as well as children! Sometimes the crowd of children of between six and eight hundred were so numerous there was a danger the supply of "Bundles" being exhausted before all had received one.

Consideration for larger children

As Clara Grant felt it was unfair that older children should be left out of the "Bundle" scheme she introduced a "Penny Shop", which was almost as popular. Two large tables were placed together and on these were laid forty-eight meat dishes containing heaps of articles, handkerchiefs, wool and knitting needles, stationery, small dolls, skipping ropes, Bibles, prayer books and other items. The older children were allowed in a dozen or so at a time to file round on a 'look walk,' then round again to buy what they had chosen with their penny.

The "Penny Shop" was discontinued in the last war as it was felt by Clara Grant to be too risky having large numbers of children assembled in one place at a time with the danger of a bomb falling on them and the "Shop" was not revived afterwards.

Awarded the. O.B.E.

In 1927 Clara Grant retired from school work and devoted herself to her "hobby" of social work and everything connected with the Fern Street Settlement. In addition she lectured, wrote articles and published, at her own expense, two autobiographical books, "Farthing Bundles" and "From Me To We", telling in an easy readable style her childhood and the later terrible conditions, sometimes humorous or appalling, she met in London. These were a success and copies were accepted "with great pleasure" by Queen Mary. Miss Grant, now widely known as "The Farthing Bundle Lady", was awarded the O.B.E. for her services at the Settlement in 1949. She died in October, 1949, aged 82, and was interred in nearby Bow Cemetery, her grave being marked by a stone in the shape of a book entitled "The Farthing Bundle Lady". Many of the older residents in the area still remember her as a kind, good-hearted person, with a great sense of humour but also firm and resolute with the handling of situations and people and the upbringing of children. Some of these folk still believe their later life, character and good health was due to the way they "was taught and brought up as one of Miss Grant's children".

Now the Settlement is mainly concerned with caring for the elderly because many of the aims for which it was founded have become obsolete or achieved. It provides club social activities, home visits to sick and elderly, coach excursions and material and spiritual help. But in Miss Grant's memory the "Farthing Bundles" Scheme still continues and is as popular as ever. The standard of living has vastly risen for most families, but there are exceptions and although only a small proportion of the "Bundles" reach those in genuine need, that proportion still exists. The "ticket" system has been abolished, also any child can now participate, regardless where they live, providing they can pass through the "Arch". This has been increased in height from four feet to four feet four inches in recent years as the modern generations of children are taller for their age. There has also been an increase in the fee paid. When the farthing ceased to be legal tender in 1960 and withdrawn from circulation it was unavoidable to raise the "fee" to a halfpenny!

Custom still going strong

On alternate Saturdays the children form a queue outside the Settlement from 8.15 onwards. At 8.45 the "Arch" is carried out and set up on the pavement, the "Farthing Bundle" distribution begins. Each boy or girl that can walk upright through the "Arch" without their head touching the wooden cross-bar or having to stop to pass under it receives a "Bundle" upon payment of the halfpenny in the collecting box. Usually about 150 Bundles are purchased on a normal Saturday, either from the "boy" or "girl" barrel, The money collected is used to help the funds of the Settlement care for old people. The "Bundles" today usually contain sundry small toys, pencils, crayons, drawing books, dolls, marbles, balls, beads, etc., wrapped in newspaper. These are generously given by local traders and friends of the Settlement far and wide, sometimes from Londoners who have emigrated and keep in touch with old friends by taking part. Presents are also still received from the Sunday School at the Sun Street Methodist Church in Clara Grant's home town of Frome. Unfortunately many of her friends who originally assisted in the scheme have now died and help from other people willing

to send these small gifts is urgently required. The rising cost of toys and postage make it expensive for donators to send items frequently to keep the scheme going. However, Mrs. Eileen Peel, the Secretary and Warden of the Settlement, assured me that somehow efforts will always be made to ensure that every boy and girl that can walk under the "Arch" and pay halfpenny will receive a "Bundle" so that Clara Grant's idea does not die out.

(Original source not recorded)



Clara Ellen Grant (1867-1949)