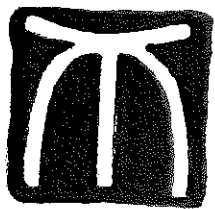


SISTER LACE



any years ago there lived a woman who was very talented at making lace, so everyone called her Sister Lace. She created lacework plants and birds and animals so beautiful and intricate that they seemed to be living creatures. Her work was the greatest treasure of her village, and anyone who owned a veil or curtain or dress or jacket made by Sister Lace was considered very lucky indeed.

Word of Sister Lace's skill spread throughout the land, and girls from all over the country came to study with her. Sometimes her students would become frustrated and despair of ever being able to make lace as beautiful as hers. But Sister Lace was a kind and patient teacher. "Do not worry," she told the girls. "Everything I know, someday you will know, too. You must learn to make lace with your heart as well as your fingers. That is the secret. In time you will learn how to do it."

One day a peddler came to the court of the emperor and sold him a handkerchief made by Sister Lace. The work was so exquisite that the emperor insisted on finding out who had made it. When he heard about Sister Lace, he became angry with his courtiers. "Why didn't you tell me there was a woman of such skill living in my kingdom?" he scolded them. "She should be here at court working for me. Lace this fine should be made only for the emperor." Then he sent out a contingent of soldiers to bring Sister Lace to the palace at once.

When the soldiers arrived at Sister Lace's cottage, she refused to go with them. "I have no interest in the emperor," she declared. "My work is here in my village, making lace for

my people and sharing my skill with the girls who come to study with me. I cannot leave them."

"How dare you refuse to see the emperor!" one of the soldiers shouted. The girls gathered around their teacher, trying to protect her, but the soldiers knocked them down and seized Sister Lace. As she was carried away, she called back to her students, "Be strong; be patient. Remember everything I've taught you, and someday you'll make lace finer than my own — I swear it."

At the emperor's palace, Sister Lace refused to walk and was dragged before the emperor. "Stop this nonsense, woman," the emperor commanded. "You are here now, and you will never go back to your village. You will marry me, and from this time forward, you will make lace only for me."

Sister Lace thought of the good people of her village, her beautiful cottage where she had spent such happy years working at her craft, and the girls who came to study with her. She hated the emperor with all her heart. When he tried to draw her close to him, she scratched at his eyes and kicked at him. "I'll never marry you!" she cried.

The emperor's face grew red with anger and embarrassment. No woman had ever treated him like this before. He pushed her away and ordered his guards to throw her into prison.

The next day the emperor came to stand by the door of her prison cell. Sister Lace sat on the bare floor, staring sadly at her empty hands. She didn't even notice him. The powerful ruler rattled the bars of her cell to get her attention. "Foolish woman! If you marry me, you will live in comfort all the rest of your days. All you will have to do is open your mouth to be fed and hold out your hands to be dressed," he told her.

Sister Lace raised her head and looked into the emperor's eyes. "I know how to feed myself and dress myself. Why should I marry you? I don't love you. I love no one but the people of my village and the girls who come to study with me. I love nothing but making lace. I want nothing from you."

The emperor laughed angrily. "Very well," he said. "If you love making lace so much, make me a live rooster on a length of lace. Then you can return to your stupid village. Otherwise, you will stay here forever. You have seven days."

The prison guards brought material to her jail cell, and for seven days Sister Lace worked day and night to make a rooster. On the seventh day it was done. She pricked her finger with her needle and rubbed the blood on the rooster's feathers, and a tear rolled down her cheek and fell into the rooster's mouth like a pearl. With a flap of its wings, the rooster stood up and crowed.

Soon the emperor and his courtiers came to the prison cell. The emperor was shocked to find a live rooster struggling to break free of a length of lace. "What kind of trick is this?" he cried. "You didn't make this rooster. It's one of the birds from the palace. Make

me a wild partridge. I'll give you another seven days to finish it, and if you can't do it, you'll be my wife."

As he turned to leave, the rooster suddenly broke free of the length of lace, flew at the emperor, and began tearing at his forehead with its claws. "Free Sister Lace!" the rooster crowed. "Free Sister Lace or it will be the death of you!"

The courtiers quickly caught the rooster and killed it. The emperor's eyes grew cold as ice, and his mouth set in a grim line. "I will never let her go," he muttered as he walked away, wiping the blood from his temples.

Sister Lace worked day and night to make the wild partridge. On the seventh day it was finished. She pricked her finger with her needle and brushed the blood onto the partridge's feathers. She thought of her village, and a tear rolled down her cheek and dropped into the partridge's mouth like a pearl. With a flap of its wings, the partridge stood up and ran about the prison cell in circles.

When the emperor came once again to see his prisoner, he found a live partridge perched on a nest of lace in the corner of her cell.

"Where did this bird come from?" he shouted. "I never told you to make me a partridge. I told you to make me a heavenly dragon. Enough of this nonsense. Make me a dragon within seven days, or you'll never see your home again."

As the emperor turned to leave the cell, the partridge flew from the corner and landed on his head, scratching at his neck with its claws. "Free Sister Lace!" the partridge called. "Free Sister Lace or it will be the death of you!"

The courtiers hurried to chase the partridge from the emperor's head, beating it with sticks until it was dead. The emperor left the prison with blood dripping down his neck and the bitter taste of anger on his tongue.

For seven days and seven nights, Sister Lace worked in her prison cell, though her eyes were burning from tears and exhaustion and her fingers were sore and clumsy. She ignored the pain and worked with her heart, and on the seventh day she had finished the dragon. She knew it was more beautiful than anything she had ever made before. She pricked her finger and brushed the blood along the dragon's scales, painting it red, and a tear rolled down her cheek and dropped into the dragon's mouth like a pearl. With a toss of its fiery head, the dragon came alive.

Sister Lace held the little dragon on her lap and wept. "Oh, my little dragon, you are more beautiful than anything I have ever made, but what good will it do me?" she cried. "Now the emperor will tell me he wanted a fish instead of a dragon, and he will kill us both. I know I'll never be able to go back to my village again."

Soon the emperor came yet again to the door of her prison cell. When he saw the dragon with its lacy scales, he began to tremble. "This is not a dragon — it's a snake!" he shouted, backing away from Sister Lace.

Sister Lace

The little dragon erupted in fury. It raised its head and breathed out a stream of fire, which curled around the emperor and burned him to death. Soon the prison was on fire, and then all the palace was burning up in a roaring blaze.

Riding on the back of the dragon, Sister Lace flew into the sky. There she has worked, from that day to this, making the lace that covers the night sky with stars.

The girls of her country have never forgotten Sister Lace's promise that someday they will be able to make lace as fine as hers. Whenever they look up at the evening sky, they remember her secret, and their lace is as beautiful as the stars.