

The Silk Stocking an Inventor's Fate

By FRANZ KARMEL

Over 340 years ago, in the lovely village of Calverton, near Nottingham, England, a young theologian, William Lee, fresh from school, fell up to his ears in love with little Mary, the sweetest and neatest girl in Calverton. All day long he could have looked into her beautiful, deep blue eyes—but that was impossible, for little Mary sat from morning till night knitting stockings. In those days, i.e., in 1589, stockings were a very high-priced luxury and could be afforded only by the rich and noble. Knitting was very profitable, and nimble fingered Mary was able to give her parents a nice amount of money every week. But whenever she looked up from her work too long, the stitches would fall,—they fell so easily,—and time was money!

William Lee sat and watched Mary's busy little fingers, taking up stitch by stitch, and he began to hate this knitting, which, in

his eyes, made her a slave. In spite of being a scholar and theologian, Lee was a practical man, and it occurred to him that it might be possible to multiply the work of the fingers by means of a machine. Thus gradually he conceived the idea of a knitting machine in which wooden sticks replaced the fingers.

Quite a few difficulties were to be overcome, however, before he could carry out his project. Eventually he was made minister in Calverton, and Mary was his wife, but his income was very small, and Mary again took to knitting to help out the budget. Day and night her young husband worked over the wooden structure of his machine, stubbornly trying out improvements and making changes. At last in 1593 he succeeded in completing the knitting machine, which when finally perfected took up twelve stitches in a row and added row to row.

From morning till night the knitting machine was rattling in the minister's house. While Lee was knitting his wife sewed up the edges in the shape of stockings. After a nice quantity of stockings had been produced Lee wanted to sell them. Crowds of people came to look at the miraculous machine, but nobody wanted to buy the stockings, even though they were much cheaper than those made by hand.

Lee was thoroughly disappointed, but continued his efforts, in spite of further lack of success. Within four months he sold 25 pairs of stockings—5 per cent of his stock! Finally he found a man who was interested in his machine, Lord Hundsdon, a highly educated nobleman of great influence, but of limited means. Lee took his advice to move to London, and opened a workshop in Bunill-Fields, taking with him a few trained assistants. Lord Hundsdon was so enthusiastic about Lee's invention that he made even his son one of his apprentices.

One summer day in 1593 seemed to decide Lee's fate, when Queen Elizabeth of England, having been interested in the new machine of wonders by Lord Hundsdon, appeared in the master's workshop, where Lee, overwhelmed with happiness, explained the knitting machine in all its details to Her Majesty. The Queen showed great surprise and satisfaction. Before she left, Lord Hundsdon, aware of the opportunity of the moment, spoke to her of the inventor's great

poverty, his disappointments and struggle for success, asking her to grant him financial assistance and a patent on his machine. "How can I do that, My Lord," said the Queen. "I like the poor people who earn their bread by knitting stockings much too much to support an invention which would put them to begging. If Mr. Lee were manufacturing silk stockings, only few would be involved, but woolen stockings should not be monopolized by one individual."

Lee remained a gallant fighter. He returned to his work, never tiring, and started to change the construction of the machine for the manufacture of silk stockings. He succeeded after five years' work, and in 1598 he asked to be admitted to the Queen. His request was granted, and Lee handed to the Queen a pair of marvelous silk stockings. She praised his work highly, but even then she refused to assist him financially. Lord Hundsdon had died in 1597, and Lee found himself helpless, poor and miserable in the enormous city of London. After a series of privations he died in 1608 in utter misery the traditional death of so many great geniuses and eminent inventors!

Three hundred and thirty years have passed since then and the basic principle of Lee's machine hardly has been changed. The idea of the modest minister has developed to be the blessing of millions of people.



The Origin of the Knitting Machine