

THE IRON LAST

By John Barnshaw



For the benefit of those who have no knowledge of an iron last and its sculptural slender beauty,ours had the curved grace of a Swan's neck, polished mirror like surfaces, the cooling quality of ice, and the 'teeng' of a tuning fork when played on by a coal fire poker. All this,plus the practical use of keeping large families decently shod.

Yes reader.An iron last is,or was (cobbling's now as defunct as the Dodo) a cobbling¹ implement and at one time as vital to households as a needle and thread. There follows a based on fact 1960s tale of such an Iron Last.

Pat heard the thuds as she turned the key in the door lock,and "tch tch tch" she tutted annoyingly.

Seconds later her head shook non comprehendingly as her eyes took in the scene. Her mother,seventy four years old Kathleen Kelly was bent over the bench and was bringing a hammer down in rhythmical movement on to the sole of a shoe impaled on an iron last.

"Oh mother!" Pat said irately. Kathleen stopped and turned. "What's the matter?" she said. "*What's the matter?* I thought you had thrown that thing away, an' you've got *new* shoes in that cupboard." "Anno,but there's plenty wear in these yet.The uppers are okay." "Oh mother" Pat said hopelessly. "When yeh gonna realise you've no need for such thrift now? An' mother.You're still wearin' that old tattered cardigan. Our Maureen bought yeh two for Christmas."

Kathleen had put the hammer down. Now her hands went to the bottom hem of her cardigan,and as she tugged at it preeningly she said. "I only wear it when I'm cobblin'."

"Bliddy liar." Our Maureen saw yeh in the co-op yesterday an' yeh had it on." "A must 'ave been in too much of a hurry teh change." Pat's head to and fro'ed slowly as "mother" she said. "Listen, change is the word. When are you goin' to?"

Look." She nodded to the floor.That's the last clippie² mat in the country. So chuck it out an' we'll get yeh a nice Persian rug." Kathleen's eyes fixed fondly on the mat as she said. "I don't want anything foreign, an' yeh granny Kelly an' me made that."

"Mother man!³ It's over forty years old! Same as that bliddy quilt you've still got on yeh bed which you've patched an' patched. There's more than the original stuff!" "Granny Kelly made me that as well,an' the patches aren't old."

Pat's head was on the move again in nonplussed manner as she said. "Mother! Our Maureen an' I are agreed. We are gonna wrap that last up in that cardigan,wrap them in

that bliddy quilt, roll the lot up in that-----she pointed to the floor-----an' get the council teh take them away---next week. So get used teh the idea. Mother. We only want what's best for you."

Kathleen made no answer. "I'll put the kettle on" she said. Pat had gone, and Kathleen sat alone, and her eyes fixed on the iron last that was to be thrown out. It had been with her all her life. Had been used by her father to keep well shod his nine of a family, and one of her earliest little girl memories was the 'thud thud thud' of hammer upon sole. The iron last was her inheritance, allowed by her siblings because she – being the oldest – had taken over the cobbling when their father had died.

As she looked at it an array of footwear going back years imaged in her mind. She recalled her first ones, nearly always the boots of her young brothers, soles worn away by constant running and climbing. Then the peak of her cobbling when living continually on the dole in the 1930s when a bob⁴ a week was supposed to keep a child – and she had seven, and a one armed man for a husband, who's limb had been left in one of Rupert Brooke's⁵ corners of a foreign field. In Danny's case the corner was at Ypre in France. It left only one arm for work, and what was there for a one armed man? Nout, except for a bit of bookie's running which was illegal, and at which Danny was always getting caught. Then even if he didn't, he often backed the wrong horses and Robbo the bookie got his money back.

So she had cobbled on for her own offspring – four of them lads, and all football crazy. She smiled wryly as she recalled how she had raked up a shilling⁶ so Eamon her oldest could buy a pair off a friend, and how they had been passed down from brother to brother as she maintained them over the years, such as mixing mangle⁷ grease with boot polish and applying it to the leather regularly, and re-soleing them with home-made leather strips after extracting worn down studs. Then being rather disconsolate when in a better time Vincent her youngest – then an apprentice fitter had announced he was buying a new pair.

Boots and shoes flooded into her mind, and memories of particular pairs amused her. Brown ones, hand me downs also - for the girls – but which she had adapted for use by the lads, and the furore. "Mother! I'm not wearing the lasses' shoes." "Nobody could tell that man! Look. They're black ones now. An' it's either these or bare feet."

Then there was a swanky brogue pair she'd bought off 'Sleethy' the rag and bone man for Danny – crippled him he'd said, but too good not wear, only cobbled once, and never scuffed. The wry smile crossed her face again as she recalled Danny's words. "Hippo's hide. Sleethy must 'ave got them off a man from Africa."

Another transient smile crossed her face as she recalled her own footwear. It was easy, - she could recall them all – until recently she had only had six pairs of shoes in over thirty years, and three of those gifts from a sister in law, and all of them soled and heeled countless times - always by her own efforts. Her face took on a sad wistful look as she recalled how she had even been cobbling when Danny had died, she had heard him cry out "Kathleen" from the next room, and found him dead in his chair when she had got to him.

The wistful look evaporated to a wry smile again as she said to herself. 'An' I went back an' finished the cobblin' – well Danny. Yeh grandson was a keen hiker at the time.'

The pleas from the family over the years came to her mind. "Oh mother! At least take them to the cobblers. I'll pay for them" from Pat, and the recalling on that occasion of years

before when if she'd wanted to take her own shoes to a cobbler she would have had to walk it in her bare feet, and that a cobbler's fee meant less food, of which there was never a glut. And Maureen's wit. "Oh mother! D'yeh want that bliddy lump of iron put in yeh coffin?" To which she had replied. "Yes I'll take it with me. Yeh fatha must be down on his uppers now."

Kathleen dosed off in a lovely dream of rows of equally spaced nail heads, shiny heel segs, and well trimmed leather soles. The next week the girls, duly without fuss, came and did their wrapping up. "Mother. The council truck's comin' on Thursday." "Is it now?"

It did, and a week or so later a new Persian rug had replaced the clippie mat, and a Duvet cover the old patched quilt, and Kathleen was seen in the Co-op with a new car-digan on. But later again, as Pat, paying an unexpected call on her mother put the key in the door, and heard the "thud thud thud" she exclaimed "That old bugger!"

Inside, Kathleen was putting another sole on her heavy winter shoes, an old practice of the lean years, and "thud, thud, thud" she banged away, the iron last that she had retrieved taking the force of her blows.

Footnotes

1. *The art of mending the worn out soles and heels of footwear.*
2. *Made from scrap bits of cloth.*
3. *Man? Used in the North East for any gender.*
4. *Famous English poet.*
5. *Implement for wringing out clothes.*
6. *A twentieth of a pound sterling.*