Manuscript: The Sewing Room of Sixty Years Ago

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THE SEWING ROOM OF SIXTY YEARS AGO

The sewing room was second in importance only to the kitchen in economy of the average comfortably off family of the '70's and '80's. That family belonged to this class, a class which believed its comforts would last only as long as carefully as it looked after the article as it did the income.

Through the years in which I was growing up to self-supporting young womanhood, the sewing room was of vital interest for there we women folks—my mother, my sister, and myself, were clothed from the skin up. We bought nothing ready-made except our hoop skirts and corsets, stockings and shoes and occasionally a ready-made coat.

The sewing room had nothing to do with the men of the family save to keep on their buttons and mend their worn and tears. They had arrived at the stage where they bought "store", that is ready-made clothes.

The activities of the sewing room were perpetual but had its great moments. The chief of these were two periods—Spring and Fall—when a real dressmaker came to produce the best or Sunday dress which theoretically each of us had to have for the year's coming season to turn the last/best dress into a second best and
very important to see what could be made of old things.

The dressmaker knew our resources as well as we did. A part of her code was that nothing should be thrown away which could be possibly used. How often I have heard my Mother say, "Well, I never should have thought of doing that."

Preparations for the dressmaker's coming were elaborate and serious. For weeks each of us planned what we were to have for this best dress, looking at the styles in Demarest's Monthly which was our chief text book, choosing our patterns and the serious business - choosing the material. Not from samples - Oh, no. Our favorite dry goods store carried on its shelves a large assortment of wools and silks, poplins and alpacas for winter - of delaines and organizes, lawns and calicos for summer. Again and again we looked them over, considered price and above all quality, for quality in my Mother code was moral. If it were wool it must be all wool; if it were silk it must be pure silk; if it were cotton it must be fine.

The dress patterns must be in the house before the dressmaker arrived; and with them there must be an extraordinary collection of linings, whale bones, stiffenings, strips for binding the bottom of the skirt, spools of thread, cotton and silk - a variety of numbers. You knew the dressmaker's preference on these important matters and you took care to see they were provided. There must be hooks and eyes of two or three sizes, packages of pins and of course the patterns and the fashion magazines.
The sewing room must be ready. That meant that the sewing machine had been over-hauled and oiled, that the shears and button scissors had been sharpened, that innumerable bobbins were wound for the double thread Wheeler and Wilson machine. Sewing tables, lap boards and scrap baskets must be on hand and the chair we knew the coming autocrat preferred in the place she preferred.

And then came the momentous day. We liked it to be Monday for then the dressmaker had had a Sunday to sleep off her
last place. We knew all about her clients. They were as fixed as the stars. We had them pretty well classified. There were those we knew to be "trying." We aimed never to be "trying." There were those who we thought spoiled her by attention. We couldn't rival them, but we did our best. As a matter of fact the fortnight the dressmaker was in the house she was the center of the establishment. She breakfasted at home, but a hot cup of coffee was taken up to her as soon as she arrived. She shared our noon dinner and Mother saw to it that her favorite dishes were on the table. At four o'clock both Mother and the dressmaker had a cup of tea to help them through the last terrible hour when their cheeks were flushed and their tempers were a bit ragged.

And now came the cutting, the basting, the trying on and finally the trimming. When it came to the trimming there was an excitement for us all because of the choice. You could have tight bands; you could have ruffles; you could have bugles; you could have passe-menterie. I was not allowed the bugles and jet trimmings that I coveted, but when it came to buttons which were a very great favorite I could have all I wanted. There was an endless variety and of all sorts of materials. They not only contributed to our adornment but they contributed to one of the favorite collecting items of the young of that period - the button string. I had buttons from all the family past, from friends past and present. These strings grew to enormous length and you must know the history of every button. I would give a
great deal for my button string today.

After the dressmaker had gone at five o'clock then came the operation called "cleaning up the litter" in which I was supposed to come in strong. The patterns must be very carefully folded and laid aside safely. I was never trusted with this. That was Mother's job unless the dressmaker preferred to do it itself.

But I could pick up the pieces and sort things.

That was serious business for everything must be saved. The big pieces were carefully folded up for future re-paring and re-making and put into what was called the "piece box." The little scraps went into Mother's piece bag to be used on the crazy quilt she always had under way. My Mother was a remarkable needle woman having been put to it at three years of age by a stern New England godmother. She knew an interminable number of stitches and used them all with varieties of colored silks in piecing her quilts. Every piece meant something to her - a story - just as every one of my buttons meant something to me. I have never treasured a crazy quilt on my favorite cot in the country which cuts the story of the gowns which came out of our sewing room over a period of at least twenty five years.

When all the pieces which might be useful for future renovation or for the crazy quilt had been put aside there came the trying and uninteresting part of picking up bastings and lint, tiny bits of cloth and paper and string. All had to be picked up carefully to avoid raising dust. No vacuum cleaners remember.
The litter went into the trash barrel in the woodshed. Then the floor was sprinkled and carefully swept. The chairs and tables and equipment arranged for the next morning.

The best gowns done the dressmaker turned to the second best. If she had time she put them into shape herself if not she gave careful directions to Mother as to how she and a seamstress who came in by the day occasionally could make them look "as good as new."

I always loved my second best dress. A new dress bothered me and does to this day. But I felt at home in the second best, I knew exactly how to get in on and off and then I didn't have to be so careful of it.

When the gowns were done there was the question of taking care of them. I do not remember that in those days we had such a thing as a coat hanger. A coat hanger on a pole even now is a kind of luxury to me. We had hooks, three pronged hooks and on the seams under the arms were loops or at the waist line. You were supposed to hang your gown carefully to these on two adjoining hooks so that it hung without wrinkling. Woe the day the best dress was found hanging by one loop or the second best for that matter. I might as well confess that I did not mind if the old dress was lying on the floor.

Beside this important Spring and Fall campaign there went on in the household the steady making of all the garments beneath the gowns. By the '70's I was wearing high
neck, long sleeve, long legged, pure wool home-made combination suits. They had to be well fitted. Mother did not think those that were beginning to come into our market fitted properly. Over these were worn cotton drawers buttoned around the waist—"panties" we called them, sometimes open, more often buttoned in below the knee. Over this went a high-necked chemise. There was the same care taken about the quality of our best under garment as there was about the quality of the best gown and according to Mother there must never be any imitation lace. She hated imitation lace as she hated lies. She herself knit beautiful lace, hemmed and tucked ruffles for the bottom of drawers and chemises—fine little ruffles, miles of them. But the factory got the best of her finally. In the multitude of duties that the complication of life was bringing to her she finally yielded ready-made to/ruffling and machine tucking. I am not sure but that she prayed God to forgive her for this concession to the new world. At any rate until the day of her death she would sigh and talk of the difference between the hand-made and the machine-made things.

Over our underthings we wore petticoats and skirts.

For every day I had a red flannel petticoat, for Sunday a white flannel embroidered petticoat, that is in the winter. And over that in winter some kind of warm colored petticoat. In the
Summer tucked and frilled white petticoats. All these things were laundered at home. Every week when they came off the ironing board they were looked over for lost buttons and tears and put into what was considered proper shape. They were folded
As for stockings we wore heavy woolen stockings in winter sometimes of Mother's beautiful knitting - cotton stockings for summer, black or white according to the occasion. I never heard of silk stockings in those days but we did have a fine lisle, a really beautiful thing for Sunday this was in Summer.

Our boots buttoned up. The Congress gaiter belonged to my childhood - I hated it - but the button boot of fine calf's leather was a thing of pride.

Thus we were outfitted with pain and thought and care. And what did we do with our wardrobe? The common name for that best dress - "Sunday dress" - suggests the most important function for which we dressed. That was going to Church. Going to and from Church up the main street in our town of Titusville, Pennsylvania, where I lived had all the features of the Fifth Avenue Parade in New York City today. Essentially it was the same thing and if there was nobody to take pictures of our regalia as they do in these days you were sure there were plenty of people in that parade who surreptitiously out of the corner of their eye looked to see how Jennie's new basque was made or the trimmings on her hat.

The hat was important. You did not choose from a multitude of them as you do now. There were models in the milliner shop and you chose your shape and your trimmings so that you really had a part in the making of your hat.
tragedy of these Spring and Sunday dress parades was when you
met on the street somebody who had a gown made like yours out
of the same material or a hat that was a duplicate – that was
tragedy. At Rarely very rarely did one see from them only

There were simple accessories which turned the
best dress into a party dress. My favorite was the fichu,
a long, very long, scarf, about the shoulders, brought down
to the waist line in front, carried around the waist and tied
in a big flat bow behind. I liked them long and very, very
soft and trimmed with little ruffles. The fichu was one of the
garments of this period that I remember wearing with the most
pleasure.

It was with a wardrobe gathered and made in some-
thing of this fashion that I went to college in 1876. The

only thing I remember of that wardrobe was the gown I wore to the
class room. It was a tightly fitting black alpaca redin-gote,
down to my instep in front, a tiny train behind. It was trimmed
with white pearl buttons, almost as large as the twenty five
cent pieces. They began at the neck, ran down to the shoulder,
then down the side for the redin-gote was open at the side, to
the bottom of the skirt. There were forty eight of them.

The first bit of provocative coquettishness in
my dress that I remember was connected with this black alpaca with
the pearl buttons. I wore it over a scarlet felt skirt,
scalloped in black silk, black embroidery above. On the campus
where the paths were never too well cared for my little train
would necessarily be lifted and I took great care in lifting it
so as to show that scarlet petticoat.

A college wardrobe of 1876 was beginning to yield to the dress reform the militant women writers were prosecuting so diligently. Just as the factory had invaded my Mother's sewing room so I was beginning to feel the agitation for sensible dressing. I had already laid the corset with the steel stays and was wearing a stitched Ferris waist buttoned down the front. Also my hoop skirt was only now a relic of the fine old balloon that I had worn as a child.

Perhaps the most picturesque, as well as fashionable episode in the 19th Century is the rise and fall of the hoop skirt. It went down before fashion's restless passion for change combined with the fight made on it by militants.

Your silhouette which had been that of a huge swaying bell had become only half of its old self. Now the silhouette was very like that of a pear that had been cut horizontally down the middle, flat in front, bulging behind and gradually this was giving away. My black aplaca redingote of 1876 was worn over one of these half hoops, a bustle or little shelf at the waist line behind. Better to burn out the skirt.

Another item I remember about this college wardrobe was my favorite hat - an English walking hat of plain velvet. Around it crossing in the back and brought down around my neck and tied in a big flat bow under my chin I wore a long narrow black and real lace veil edged with "real" lace. It was a sturdy scarf
bought for quality - a long-lived one and I never felt
grander than when I had it properly fixed and that bow properly
tied under my chin.

I remember nothing of coats, but I do remember
a shawl. It went along with the black redin-gote and the red
skirt - a large black and red plaid of the finest wool. How
I loved it. It lasted for years growing thinner and thinner,
more and more faded. I suspect that some scoffing member of my
household finally used it for a mop, but I know if I had had my
way it would still be among my treasures.

What impressed me now as I think of the way we
dressed is that I got so much more fun out of it, as well as so
much more sense of domestic economy. The careful planning, the
serious effort to carry out our plans, the attention to principles;

My Mother said quality was a virtue, imitation a kind of sin.
My Father said waste was wrong, you robbed the poor. A These
two principles were forced down to the last steps in our carefully
supervised sewing room. Cultivated in spirit all.

The first of these was the passing on of an old
dress finally discarded to somebody who you thought needed it.
You put it in order, pressed it, gave it to the person. Then
you watched to see how she used it. If she didn't take care of
it you were very liable to say to yourself, "Well, I'll never give
her another." You resented the lack of respect for the thing
which you had so long respected.
The second and final act in the sewing room

The second and final act in the sewing room drama was the burning of the contents of the waste barrel in the woodshed, which we had gradually filled, the contents from the picking up the litter after each day's work, the contents of the rag bag into which had gone old linings, old strips of heavy cloth, thinking at the moment we couldn't see a possible use for it. These rag bag pieces were carefully looked over to make sure before they finally went to the trash barrel. There might frequently be old pieces of cotton goods enough to be made into dusting rags, and there were always woolen pieces which Mother carefully cut into carpet rags, one of the industries which she carried on as regularly as she did her knitting of lace, her hemming of ruffles and the piecing of crazy quilts.

As I think back on this production of my Mother's, I see how intelligently she arranged these different kinds of works to relieve her nervous tension—always great. When she did not want to knit lace she could hem; if she did not want to hem she could embroider; if she did not want to embroider she could sew rags.

When the trash barrel was full my Father took it out with a pile of other rubbish to the middle of his garden there. Some still twilight he burned it. It was always an event to me. I sat on the back steps and watched the remnants of the process which had meant so much to me going up in bluish white smoke, red tongues of flame running through it, growing thinner and thinner. When the last solid particle was consumed, the smoke died down,
Father raked up the ashes and distributed them as he needed them in his garden. Good fertilizer. "Nothing lost but the smoke," he said. But now about the smoke? It hadn't been lost on me. I had dreamed dreams into it as it went up, new dresses and less luxurious material dreams. Who can say that smoke over which you dreams is lost?