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Please Return

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THE SEWING ROOM OF SIXTY YEARS AGO

In the economy of the average comfortably off family of the '70's and '80's - the class to which my family belonged - the sewing room was second in importance only to the kitchen. Through the years in which I was growing up to self-supporting young womanhood my Mother, my Sister and myself, were clothed from the skin up in this sewing room. We bought nothing ready-made except our hoop skirts and corsets, stockings and shoes and occasionally a ready-made coat.

The activities of the sewing room, like those of the kitchen, were continual. Like the kitchen it had its great moments. The chief of these were two fixed periods - Spring and Fall - when a real dressmaker came to produce the best or Sunday dress which theortically each of us had to have for the coming season.

Preparations for this best dress were elaborate and serious. Days were spent 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 organdies, lawns and calicos for summer. Again and again we looked them over,

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considered price and above all quality, for quality in my Mother's 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, of a favorite make.

Dress materials must be in the house before the dressmaker arrived, also the patterns prayerfully selected from the big stock the dry goods store carried. With them there must be an extraordinary collection of linings, whale bones, stiffenings, braids for binding the bottom of the skirt, spools of thread, cotton and silk - a variety of numbers. There must be hooks and eyes of two or three sizes, packages of pins and of needles.

The sewing room must be ready. That meant that the sewing machine had been over-hauled and oiled, that the shears and button-hole scissors had been sharpened, that innumerable bobbins had been wound for the double thread Grover Baker 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

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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 a bit ragged.

The process of making the dress was methodical. First, the cutting, then the basting, the trying on, the finishing off and finally the trimming. When it came to the trimming there was the excitement because of the choice. You could have bands or ruffles of the material; you could have fringe, bugles, passe-menteries. I was not allowed the bugles and jet trimmings that I coveted, but when it came to buttons I could have all I wanted. They came in an endless variety of sizes and shapes. They contributed not only to our adornment but 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 and I knew the history of every one of them. I would give a great deal today for my old button string.

Each day after the dressmaker had gone came the operation called "cleaning up the litter." Here I was

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expected to come in strong. I was never trusted with folding the patterns, that was Mother's job unless the dressmaker preferred to do it herself. But I could pick up and sort the pieces left over. That was serious business for everything must be saved. The big pieces were carefully folded up for future re-pairing 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 an expert needle woman having been put to it at three years of age by a stern New England bred / mother. She knew an interminable number of stitches and used them all in 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 now a treasured crazy quilt on my favorite cot in the country from which I could write a fairly complete history 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 a dust." No vaccum 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.

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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 it 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 or at the waist band were loops by which you were supposed to hang your gown 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.

Beside this important Spring and Fall campaign there went on in the sewing room a steady production of 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 from the factory fitted properly. Over those were worn cotton drawers buttoned around the waist - "panties" we called them -

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sometimes open, more often buttoned below the knee. Then came a high-necked chemise. There was the same care taken about the quality of our best under garments as there was about the quality of the best gown and according to Mother there must never be any imitation lace or machine embroidery used. She hated imitations as she hated lies. She, herself, knit beautiful lace, hemmed and tucked ruffles - miles of them - for the bottom of drawers and chemises. But the factory got the best of her finally. In the multitude of new duties that life was bringing to her she finally yielded to ready-made 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 hand-made and 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 heavy colored petticoat. In the Summer we had tucked and frilled white petticoats. All these things were laundered at home and every week when they came off the ironing board they were looked over for lost buttons and tears and put into proper shape before they were folded away in the bureau drawers.

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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 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 for what occasions? The common name for that best dress - "Sunday dress" - suggests the most important function - 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 your new basque was made or your hat trimmed. The tragedy of these Spring and Sunday dress parades was when you met on the street somebody who had a gown made like yours and out of the same material or a hat that was a duplicate - that was a tragedy.

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Rarely, very rarely, did our sewing room turn out a party dress, but there were simple accessories which turned the best dress into a party dress. My favorite was the fichu, a long, very long, scarf, fitted about the shoulders, brought down to the waist line in front, crossed 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 something of this fashion that I went to collge in 1876. The only article of that wardrobe which I remember distinctly 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 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 left side, to the bottom of the skirt. There were forty eight of them.

The first bit of deliberate 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 embroider 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.

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There were evidences in my college wardrobe of 1876 of the way the dress reform militant woman-righters were prosecuting so diligently was ~~taking hold~~ making its way. Just as the factory had invaded my Mother's sewing room so I was beginning to feel the agitation for more sensible dressing. I had already laid aside 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 I had worn as a child.

Perhaps the most picturesque, as well as comic episode in the history of fashion 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 from the waist line down had been that of a huge swaying bell gradually became only half of its old self. Now the silhousette was very like that of a pear that had been cut horizontally down the middle, flat in front, bulging behind. Gradually this was to give away. My black alpaca redin-gote of 1876 was worn over one of these half hoops, a bustle or little shelf behind at the wasit line better to hold out the skirt.

Another item I remember about his college wardrobe was my favorite hat - an English walking hat of plain velvet. Around it crossing in the back and brought down

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around my neck and tied in a big flat bow under my chin I wore a long narrow black 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 impresses 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 greater feeling of dignity than I do out of my present modern method. The careful planning, the serious effort to carry out plans, the attention to principles, all contributed to making the sewing room respected in our domestic economy. Its two chief principles were Mother's insistence that quality was a virtue, imitation a kind of sin - Father's contention that waste was wrong, you robbed the poor.

The applications of these principles culminated in two final acts. 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

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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 drama was the burning of the contents of the waste barrel in the woodshed. It had been gradually filled with the results of picking up the litter after each day's work and from sorting out the contents of the rag bag. Into this rag bag had been going regularly old linings, old strips of heavy cloth, things for which at the moment we could not see a use. But a stuffed rag bag was always carefully looked over to make sure of no waste before its contents finally went to the trash barrel. There might be pieces of old cotton goods fit for dusting rags, woolen pieces which Mother could cut into carpet rags, one of the sewing room "little 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 incessant production of my Mothers I see how intelligently she arranged these different kinds of work to relieve her nervous tension - always considerable. When she didnot 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.

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When the trash barrel was finally full my Father emptied it onto the pile of other rubbish in the middle of his garden and there some still twilight he burned it all. It was always an event to me. I sat on the back steps and watched the remnants of the processes which had meant so much to me going up in bluish white smoke, red tongues of flame running through it. When the last solid particle was consumed and the smoke died down Father would rake up the ashes and distribute them as he needed them in his garden. Good fertilizer. "Nothing lost but the smoke," he would laugh. But how about the smoke? It had not been lost on me. I had dreamed dreams as it went up, dreams of new dresses and less, far less, substantial things. Who can say that smoke which evokes dreams is lost?

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