

Ida M. Tarbell
120 East 19th St.
New York City

*Final Dictation
must save
it's not in case
drop*

THE SEWING ROOM OF SIXTY YEARS AGO

(2)

(C) The sewing room was second in importance only to the kitchen ^{the} ⁽¹⁾ in economy of the average comfortably off family of the '70's and '80's. ^{that to which} My family belonged to this class, a class which believed its comforts would last only as long as it ~~looked after the article as it did the income.~~ carefully as

Through the ⁽²⁾ 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. ^{in their sewing won} 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 wears and tears. They had arrived at the stage where they bought "store", that is ready-made clothes.~~

like those of the kitchen

Like the kitchen it The activities of the sewing room were perpetual but ^{joyed} 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 coming season; ^{year's} ~~to turn the last best dress into a second best and~~

continue was

~~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."

but sure
Days were spent
 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

prayerfully
How the patterns may be selected
come the big
with the day
good circumstances
 it must be pure silk; if it were cotton it must be fine. *a family*
made
material
 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, shalids 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 *needles* ~~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 ^{hole} scissors had been sharpened, that innumerable bobbins ^{had been} 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

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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 ~~when~~ 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.

the process of making the dress was methodical: first - And now came the cutting, the basting, the trying on and finally the trimming. When it came to the trimming there was *the*

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-menteries. 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 of ^{of the materials - fringe, fringe} ~~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 ^{one of them} button. I would give a

great deal ^{old} for my button string today.

^{Each day}
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. ^{predominant} 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. ^{life on}

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-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 a ^{expert} ~~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 ⁱⁿ 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 now a treasured crazy quilt on my favorite cot in the country ^{from} which ~~gives~~ ^{could make} ^{complete history} a fairly full story of the gowns which came out of our sewing room over a period of at least twenty five years. ^{stet}

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~~ ^{after the waist} or at the waist ~~line~~ ^{band}

^{were loops by which}
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 ^{serving upon a production} there went on in the household the steady making of all the garments beneath the gowns. By the '70's I was wearing high

Digitized Image, 2011, The Ida M. Tarbell Collection, 1890-1944, Allegheny College Pelletier Library.

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} ~~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. ^{Then came} ~~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. ^{or machine embroidery used} She hated imitation ~~lace~~ as she hated ~~flies~~. 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 ^{new} 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 [&] 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 ^{heavy} ~~warm~~ colored petticoat. In the ^{I had} Summer ^{I shun} 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 what ~~was considered~~ proper shape. ^{before} They were folded

away
~~carefully~~ in the ^{bureau} drawers.

As for stockings we wore heavy woolen stockings in winter sometimes of Mothers'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 boot

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?~~ ^{for occasions?} 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 ^{your} Jennie's new basque was made or the ~~trimmings on her hat.~~ ^{your} ~~trimmings~~

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. The

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. *It Rarely, very rarely, did ^{one} see any worn items out*

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 college in 1876. The only thing *article* I remember of that wardrobe *which, 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 the twenty five cent pieces. They began at the neck, *left side* 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

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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

Digital Image, 2011, The Ida M. Tarbell Collection, 1890-1944, Allegheny College Pelletier Library.

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- are contributed - to making the
society warm ~~the~~ instead of cold and domestic
earth. The two clubs prosper well.

dressed is that I got so much more fu
 greater feeling of dignity & worth than
 much more sense of domestic economy.

My Father that waste was wrong, you robbed the poor. A These *applied* -
two

principles were forced down to the ^{two} last steps in our carefully supervised sewing room. *culminated in ③ forced 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 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.

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say bag.

The second and final act in the sewing room drama was the burning of the contents of the waste barrel ~~which~~ ^{It} in the woodshed, ^{hem} ~~which we had gradually filled,~~ ^{with the usual} ~~the contents from~~ the picking up the litter after each day's work, ~~from the contents~~ ^{into this} of the rag bag into which ^{been going regularly} had gone old linings, fold strips of heavy cloth, ^{thing for which I} thinking at the moment we couldn't see a possible use for it. ^{But these rag bag pieces were} ~~these rag bag pieces~~ were carefully looked over to make sure ^{that no waste} ~~they~~ finally went to the trash barrel. There might frequently ^{old} ~~would be~~ pieces of cotton good enough to be made ^{for} into dusting rags, and ~~There were always~~ woolen pieces which Mother ^{could} ~~carefully~~ cut into carpet rags, one of the ^{sewing room} ~~industries~~ ^{little} 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 works to relieve her nervous tension - always ^{considerable} 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 ^{finally} full my Father ^{emptied} ~~took~~ it ^{into the} ~~out with~~ a pile of other rubbish ⁱⁿ to the middle of his garden. ^{all} ~~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 ~~Es~~ 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,

would
 Father ~~raked~~ ^{carried} up the ~~stones~~ and distributed them as he needed them
 in his garden. Good fertilizer. "Nothing lost but the smoke," *he*

would range
 But now about the smoke? It hadn't been lost on me. I had

substantial things
 dreamed dreams ~~into it~~ ^{dreams &} as it went up, new dresses and less, *far less,*
~~material dreams.~~ ^{evokes} Who can say that smoke ~~over~~ which ~~you~~ dreams

is lost?