

“The Patch-Work Quilt”

BY MISS C.M. SEDGWICK

THE Germans are the best economists in all the small details of life. They have the true husbandry of social means. Their faculties as well as their outer world are under the dominion of a wise economy. They carry it into the work of their imaginations. An everyday household circumstance, a piece of relic furniture or a common domestic event will supply them warp and woof for a complicated fabric, which they adorn with quaint or, it may be, brilliant fancies. In their illustrations of homely domestic life, they have the great advantage of awakening general sympathy and appealing to universal experience. Rare events and great deeds are for the few, while all share in the family history—the daily bread of life. The furniture and utensils of our childhood's home are idealized by affection and consecrated in after life. Poetry may chance to be written about them, but if it be not, they are poetry to us. They have life and a living agency. In the German fable "needles and pins come out of the tailor's shed and lose themselves in the dark, and the shovel and the broom stand upon the step and quarrel and fight." Our fancies are more subdued, but still old household things are instinct with our early lives. They embody hopes and memories long ago faded; laughs that rang out in merrier days, forgotten like the thrush's song, or the Summer's rose. What woman but can recall some bundle-drawer, or piece-bag, into which, as a girl, she was permitted to dive when a new doll was to be dressed, to explore its rolls of chintz and silk, and to gather up bits of fringe and fragments of lace, muslin and embroidery: and in long after years when the chapter of life is nearly read out, when the eye is dim and the hand tremulous, a fragment of these stuffs, made to perish in the using, which, nevertheless, have survived the frames fearfully and wonderfully made, meets the eye and unseals the fountains of emotion. A piece of puttied china will recall the family gathering and the festive dinner, and the whole array of the pantry to which the hungry school-child was admitted for the bit of pudding that thoughtful kindness had set aside.

I went, a few mornings since, to see an old family servant who had passed her childhood and youth in the service of my parents. M_, 'Little Lil' as she was called, and is even now, though a bulky old woman, was not born to serve, but to enjoy. She is the very incarnation of hilarity. She has floated down the current of life without dread, anxiety, or regret. Not '*sans reproche*,' for Lilly lives in a strict community, and her morals are not of the sternest, but feeling no responsibility (that she evidently looks upon as the exclusive privilege of "white folks") she has escaped anxiety and remorse. She is the most vivacious of that race whom God seems to have endowed with cheerfulness, as a divine armor against the evils of man's infliction. Lil, at three score and ten, has a face as smiling as a child's— not a mark of time or sorrow upon it. One of the boasted Saxon race, one of our New England matrons, who had met with a tithe of the dark events of Lilly's life would never smile again. She lives in a wretched hut where food and clothing seem to come to her by happy chances. She is the survivor of nearly all her cotemporaries; she has buried parents, children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren, and has lost some half dozen husbands, by death or desertion, yet, I doubt not, she would dance like a girl of eighteen to a merry measure. She is as earnest and indefatigable as she ever was in all good natured gossiping, and if, by

any chance, she sheds a tear, it is like the rain when the sun shines—a smile chases it. She loves her old friends, but when they drop off she turns to new ones. Like most of the colored people she is fond of merry-making and all social cheerfulness—all gatherings of human beings together, except in churches or at funerals. Solemnity is night and darkness to Lilly. She likes the excitement of a camp-meeting, but she likes it not for its religious purposes, but for any little chance crum of folly or absurdity that may be dropped there. She can even tolerate a funeral if there is a gleam of fun upon it. I once saw her at one where her side glances and stolen gesticulations were subjects for Wilkie, or Mount, the true painter of our home humorous scenes. The chief mourner, being of our Saxon race, Lilly pointed out to me as the white widow. The ceremony was marshaled by a servant of a militia colonel, and the procession of wretched one-horse vehicles, equestrians mounted on broken-down hacks, and pedestrians scrambling after, ranged with as much show of ceremony as a

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Roman ovation. Our master of ceremonies—being mounted on a black steed of " the colonel's"—calling out, as if he were commanding forces at a battle of Waterloo, now " to the right!" and now " to the left!" and now " close your ranks, gentlemen and ladies !"—himself, sometimes a hundred yards in advance of the procession, and then curveting and galloping among the old women and children to their infinite dismay. "It is as good as 'lection-day,'" said Lilly, aside, to me.

Though Lilly is a precious element in our country contentments, I rarely visit her. She saves her friends the trouble of looking after her, by dropping in once or twice a week, with an ample basket on her arm, which goes much heavier than it comes, for Lilly is in good fellowship with the servants, and she pays the heads of the house in sunshine (the best of coins) for all she gets. She is to the kitchen what the newspaper is to the parlor, and better, inasmuch as the spoken is better than the written word.

I met Lilly outside her door, and without her wonted smile, and on my asking her why she had been absent for a week, she answered:

"Why, Miss__, don't you know Hector is dying!" Hector was a' fiddler by profession, and was dying, as most of our colored people do, of a galloping consumption. After adding a few particulars of his illness, Lilly led the way in and I followed. Her little room, its rafters blackened with smoke, was darker than usual, being filled with men, women and little children of her own color. Any occasion, it matters not much what, calls these social people together. A mess was boiling over the fire for their future cheer, the only future they look to, and the dying man was very gently sinking away. He was bolstered with pillows on a chair, and he kindly nodded to me as his friends, with their customary civility, fell back to give me a view of him. He beckoned to Lilly and said something to her, but so faintly that I did not hear him. She gave me a significant glance, and going to the other side of the room took Hector's fiddle from the case in which it was hanging and brought it to him. He dimly smiled and took the bow—he could not hold the fiddle—Lilly held it for him. He essayed a

last tune, and, the ruling passion strong in death, attempted a lively one, but he was too far gone: the notes were few and solemn—the bow fell from his hand and he breathed his last. There was one moment of death-stillness, then Lilly taking up the instrument as reverently as if it contained a living spirit, replaced it in its case and, brushing away a tear, said:

"I wish you all to take notice that Hector said to me last night, 'Lilly,' says he, 'do you keep my violin as long as you live'—and I will, and let the select men and Deacon Bates talk!"

She then went into her bed-room, beckoning to me to follow her. She selected in a hurried and troubled manner the articles necessary to the last offices for Hector, and having given them to his friends in the next room, she said to me:

"This is the worst of taking boarders, having them die, and seeing to things. It's a *chore* I don't like, but then I ought not to complain, for Hector was lively as long as he lived. It's only a week ago he played for our folks to dance, and come what would, there was always a pleasant tone in Hector's fiddle! We shall be lonesome now. He's gone—he drew company as the sun draws water, and shone on them when they came. It was always bright where Hector was!"

"Has he saved anything," I asked her, "to pay the expenses of his sickness?"

"Saved, Miss! Fiddlers never save—they enjoy themselves—and what's the use of saving? What would he be the better for it now if he had gold in his trunk and two full suits? He was welcome every where, and the best was set before him. Nobody grudged Hector, and why should they? He paid in fiddling; he was the best fiddler that ever walked the country, and if he had laid up clothes, as some foolish folks do, what good would they do him now! A very little serves now, you see, and while he wanted it he had enough. Major Smith gave him that military coat he died in. The collar was silk velvet and the old epaulettes kept bright to the last. That red and yellow plaid handkerchief round his neck was given to him by a New York lady at the Pittsfield Hotel. Old Aunt Esther wanted me to take them off from him this morning. She said they did not seem suitable for a dying man to die in. 'Pooh!' says I, 'what's that to Hector? He likes to look lively as long as he lives.' 'Lilly,' she whined out, 'it will be a solemn change to his winding-sheet!' 'Never mind, Aunt Esther,' says I, 'he won't see that, and you can enjoy it as much as you please.' You are thinking I am wicked, Miss, but white folks does enjoy such things! I heard old Aunt Esther say to Miss Babcock the other day:— 'Sally,' says she, 'you and I have enjoyed a great many sicknesses and a great many deaths together,' says she."

The difference in the spirit of the two races as elucidated by Lilly is certainly striking. Those who look farthest back and forward may be most exalted in the intellectual scale, but there is a blessed compensation for a lower graduation, in the buoyant, cheerful, enjoying spirit, that gilds the dark cloud, makes pleasant waters to spring from rocks, and plucks away flowers from thorns.

It was evident that Lilly was ingeniously prolonging our conversation to escape from the solemnities of death in the next room, and I smiled at

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the eagerness she betrayed when having, as I fancied, listened, to the last thing she could have to say, she cut short my leave-taking by "Oh ! Miss, don't you want to see that quilt I told you about, that's made of pieces of all our folks' gowns ?" "Our folks" is, you know, Lilly's designation for my own family, of which she was a member for the first thirty years of her life. I did wish to see the quilt. It was one of those memorials that in a German household would have been held a sacred history. Lilly produced it from among a store of quilts which she has been her whole life amassing, not as property—no saint or hermit was ever freer from the desire of accumulation than Lilly. Diogenes himself had not a truer contempt for it. Her instincts are limited to the present. She has not the power of forecast. She is grateful to any one who will give her a present pleasurable sensation, but she would not thank her best friend for an ample annuity to become due a year hence. The quilts are not in her eye property. They are not the means of warmth and comfort—they are never used as such—they are story-books—family legends—illustrated traditions. Lilly reverses the French maxim, "*I'l n'ya a run de beau que utile;*" with her there is nothing useful but the beauty that touches the spring of her imagination. The Italians have a saying that a transplanted tree will not take root till it has been danced around. The merry gathering that forms the quilt perpetuates its pleasant associations to Lilly. The quilt in question is what is called a beggar's patch-work, formed of hexagonal bits of calico and silk. Being originally made of unwashed materials and wisely kept for show, it has preserved its original gloss. Yes, these base, perishable materials have remained unchanged, when those of whose garments they were the fragments, have long ago, played out their parts in life, and are now clothed in the white robes of the saints. In these little bits of silk and cotton is stored the memory of many a tear or smile.

"There, Miss__," said Lilly, "there is a bit of your mother's wedding-gown, worn long before you were born, of course, or I either, as to that matter; but I have heard my mother say there was not such another this side of Boston.

"Woman, or gown, Lilly!"

"Either, Miss__, either, but I mean gown. Gowns was gowns then, that could stand alone. It was a merry time they had, ma'am." Thus, Lilly, always calls her beloved mistress. "Ma'am's grandmother, old as the hills, she came over from Hampshire, came to the wedding—riding all the way on a pillion behind her grandson—a deal pleasanter than railway-ing. That is a bit of the old lady's chintz. Mother has told me how straight she stood in it, and how she curtsied to show your mother and Miss Susan—Kin—Ken—Kemp—Oh, I forget her name. The young folks learned manners in her day. The old lady did not live to mount her pillion again. She died soon after the wedding and was buried here, and her tombstone is one of the oldest in the burying ground. It does not stand as straight as the old lady did. Is not that square pretty? pink shot on white. That was a bit of Miss Susan's dress.

She came all the way from New York to be your mother's bride's-maid. She was the beauty of the city, and gay as a bird, or butterfly. She sang, and danced and frolicked, but for all that, she gained the old lady's heart and her son's too. Your uncle, he was a young minister then—a missionary to the Stockbridge Indians. They were here yet, and he had them all dressed up in the fine scarlet and purple broadcloths Queen Anne sent them, to show off to Miss Susan. But the old lady was the master hand, she did the courting, and one bright day she had two horses brought for them to ride together. She had given him a hint to tell his love-tale, as they rode up the hill and through the woods by the green pond. But when the horses came, the one for the minister was prancing and gay, and when he would have mounted he could not or dared not. So Miss Susan, a little fear-naught she was, ordered the saddles changed, and rode away laughing and cheering, and he, poor creature, after her. But they were not to hitch their horses together, for us often as he began to hem and ha, and stammer and so on, Miss Susan's horse would get the deuce into him, and off he would go, and at last it got through poor Mr. John's hair, that for love of his kin, she did not want to say him no and she could not say yes. Now, Miss_, can't you see her in that silk square! so rosy and so lively! "

I wiped away a tear that Lilly's bright vision had called forth. I saw this "Miss Susan" a few weeks since, now, herself, a granddame past ninety and blind! But that precious oil of a glad disposition that burned so brightly in her youth still burns cheerily on; and though the fire of her earlier days be somewhat diminished, she is still the central light of her home circle.

"That's a piece of ma'am's dressing-gown," resumed Lilly, "that your father brought her from Philadelphia. It was handsome enough to wear to meeting, but ma'am always took most pains to look well at home. Your father's eyes was her looking-glass. She had it on when the little girl you were named for died. I can see her now as she bent down over the dead child, and I heard her soft voice saying 'The Lord gave and the Lord hath taken away, blessed be his name.' I had heard the minister preach from that text a thousand times, but it seemed to me then that I heard those words for the first time, as they rose

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out of her heart. She was bending over—that was the way she always took trouble—rising up against it only makes the blow the harder you know. They named you after her, but I minded it was long and long before ma'am called your name. It was Russy, or Rosy, or any thing but that name. "All the children had frocks like that," she continued, pointing to a pink and green plaid; "I can see them all now. One running out to feed the chickens, another bringing in eggs, one dressing dolls, and little Harley telling how many lions and tigers he had killed. Oh, dear, dear! Miss_, can it be they have all grown up, men and women, and are dead, gone forever! But that," she added, turning instinctively from these sad thoughts, "that is a bit of the gown your cousin Olive wore when the French Doctor came to court her, and slipped into the saddle-room to put on his nankins. Ben, unknowingly locked the door,

and when the poor little fellow was let out he was as blue as indigo, and his teeth chattered so that Miss Olive could not tell whether he talked French or English."

"He got his answer in the shortest of all English words, did he not, Lilly?"

"Why, yes, he was French," reason enough, Lilly would have thought, had he issued from a Parisian dressing-room instead of a country saddle-house. "Miss Olive was odd," continued Lilly. "She kept 'on saying, no, no, to every one that came. I used to say, it's just like winding a tangled skein, Miss Olive; if you begin with putting through your thread, so you will do to the 'end. But that Miss Olive did not mean, for she vowed if she lived to turn the old maid's corner she would kill herself. She did for all go fairly round it, and married a widower at last, who was looking out, as he said, for a permanent housekeeper. Even ma'am could not help smiling when she heard that. There's a season for all things," wisely added Lilly, though she had herself, tried the conjugal experiment at all seasons. Lilly now came down to the epoch of my own memories, and visions of the past crowded upon me. My school days, our breakfasts and dinners, our meetings and partings at the old home, our merry-makings and our tragedies, my school-mates, the partners of my life, the partners of my hoped-for immortality, all were brought forth into actual presence and glowing life by these little talismans! My blinding tears fell thick and heavy over them. Lilly dashed off the great drops that came in spite of her, and rolling up the quilt thrust it back into the old cupboard, muttering something about there being no use in crying. We parted without exchanging another word.

As I retraced my way to the village I marked the changes since this patchwork history was constructed. The Indians that figured in Queen Anne's broadcloths have been driven from their loved homes here farther and farther into the shadowy West and are melted away. The wooded sides of our mountains have been cleared to feed yonder smoking furnace. Those huge fabrics for our friend H.'s chemical experiments indicate discoveries in science that have changed the aspect of the world. The whistle reached my ear from the engine plying over the very track where our good old granddame found but a bridle-path. The meadows enriched by the overflowings of the river, and ploughed by the sun-beams remain, much as they were, when the Indians planted their corn here; but the white man has let the sun in upon the hill-side, has made his plantations and his drainings. Churches have been built and decayed and built again. The Bishop visits his Diocesan where 'Miss Susan's' missionary lover preached in an Indian dialect, and Puritanism holds kindly fellowship with the church. Houses have decayed and new ones have been built over the old hearthstone. New friends almost as good as the old have come among us. Families have multiplied, and sent forth members to join the grand procession towards the Oregon, and at this very moment the bell is ringing for a meeting of the town to extend the limits of our burying-ground, it being full!

All these changes, and the patch-work-quilt remains in its first gloss!