

Old Lace

MY grandmother is illiterate. Therefore she is cut off from the diversion which reading might afford one imprisoned by the infirmities of age. I doubt, however, even if she could read whether she would do so. She is still too greatly occupied with the spectacle of life to turn her attention from it to a pale reflection of it.

She bears no resentment against the Talmudic discrimination, interpreted literally in her case, enjoining women from learning. Why should she? It has cut her off from no important revelations. Her life, even in that rigidly orthodox scheme of a village in Northern Russia, was sufficient in its experiences of human beings to grant her the wisdom she needed. The sophistication which that remote world yielded her was such that neither the new world nor the kaleidoscope of modern values could bewilder her. She needed no wide reading to persuade her of the unchanging qualities of human nature.

As for any spiritual comfort that might come to her from an ability to read the Bible, I believe her to be quite indifferent to that. In spite of all her gestures of piety she is really entirely a skeptic. She asks for no mitigations of life. The articles of her faith being clearly memorized and made into a manual of observances, she dismisses them from further consideration.

It is a wearisome task to keep a spirit which has not lost its zest for the routine of life from flagging against the limitations of age. Nevertheless she

carries on the losing battle with no admissions of defeat. Her days are an elaborate ritual of tasks cunningly inflated to cheat time. Meaningless tasks, most of them, but they serve to keep her fingers on the tangible things of life. In the energy which she bends to a set of futile tasks—the endless sorting of the fantastic treasures contained in an antique snuff-colored plush bag, the weaving of ineffectual lace for a non-existent purpose, the performance of the least significant of housekeeping tasks—there is the gesture of defiance in the face of threatening extinction. And in the culminating event of her week, when, sitting bolt upright in bed she polishes her brass candlesticks, there is the effect of ritualistic preparation for an observance of victory. Holding the sabbath lighted tapers, they signalize her triumph over another week.

Against a billowing background of huge pillows, she presents a cameo-sharp outline—for all her incessant movement a figure of intense stillness. The stillness is in her glance which takes us in with a sort of ironic mirth. These huge European pillows which hold her as in a frame are symbolical of something firm in her that has triumphed over something facile in us. She has not yielded with us too wholly to the ways of America. She has held on to her own ways against that wave of hygienic reform with which, in our first flushed and eager absorption into the American public school, we swept out of our immigrant home not only the germs but all the color and individuality, as well.

Her silence makes sharper that irony with which she views my childless married sister, whose sociological passion has left all her individual relationships in a state of suspended animation, so to speak; my school-teacher sister, who is already beginning to show the attenuations of an unwilling spinsterhood; and me, who am so uncertainly feeling my way through the toyshop of modern theories that I am likely to be choosing among them all my life long. She regards most sardonically my mother, whose tragedy she is well equipped to understand. The facile acceptance of modern ways for her children's sake has uprooted my mother from her moorings of tradition, from her group of fundamental acceptances, and set her afloat on an uncharted sea. She wanders amid alien landmarks, with no intellectual hook for taking hold on the slippery values of the new world. In the look my grandmother bends on her there is no yearning pity. It holds a gibe for the uneasy sophistication in whose murk we wander so restlessly.

But in the motions of weaving her attitude of appraisal seems somewhat softened and her silence is often broken. Something in the rhythmic, intricate

geometric diagramming of the shuttle seems to release her mind and it slips back easily to that medieval past of hers out of which she can draw such startlingly primitive patterns of form and color.

I sat beside her bedside glancing through a book which traced by a new theory the growth of household arts. Myself, I am ignorant of the simplest of them. But this book had stirred me to a romantic view of them as measures wherewith to plumb civilization. For the first time I was drawn to an examination of the pattern of the lace my grandmother was weaving.

"Why," I said ruminating over it and comparing it with a plate in the book, "this is not a Russian lace. It is a sort of French importation on a Russian design —"

My grandmother looked up and said with great pride. "You will not find many people who know the pattern of this. Nowhere else in Russia do they weave lace in this fashion or in this design. Whenever I see a woman who knows this, I ask her where she comes from and sure enough she comes from our town or one close by. It must be so, because the secret of it was first my mother's."

"But where did she learn it?" I asked.

"From strangers—strangers who came and went one winter without leaving any trace behind them but this. It was nearly twenty years before I was born—a bitter winter; a year of black frost that settled down after harvest time like a prison sentence. From the Feast of Tabernacle to Eastertime our village lay nearly buried in snow. This day in early winter, my father had gone by sledge to a town eight versts away—a day's journey—to buy some hides for the tanning which was his business. At dusk, my mother heard a tapping on the window-pane and she looked out. There stood two men—foreigners. She had never seen foreigners in all her life. These were dressed not in the sheepskins and boots and blouses of our part of the country, but in strangely colored fantastic garments that hung in fluttering rags about them. She was terribly frightened and would have barred the door to them, but she saw that they were emaciated and blue with cold. Well, whatever they were they were human beings, and you could not leave a dog to freeze on a night like this. She went to the door and opened it and asked them what they wanted. They answered in a strange gibberish, they pointed to their mouths with gestures showing that they were hungry, and they crouched in the shadow of the doorway where the lamplight might not fall on them. My mother summoned them in and gave them bowls of borsht and pieces of black bread, which they ate like starving men, making strange

sounds between themselves. Just then my father came, and he called another neighbor into council to make what they could of the strangers' speech. They signified pitifully that they wished to be hidden. Over and over again they pointed to the south. My father and his neighbor talked it over, and decided that each would shelter one of the strangers through the winter. No official would come near the house and they would be safe from any need to show passports until the spring.

"Our guest was a kind and gentle fellow. My mother told me that they never learned each other's speech, barring a few very common words, but they got on very well together in a sort of sign language. When he had been fed and warmed and clothed he was a fine young fellow—swarthy and dark and quick in his actions—and always singing. He was a great entertainer for the children—he had a merry way with them—and he was very respectful to my mother. He carried and fetched for her, split wood and carried water—and during the long winter evenings he whittled himself a little shuttle like this one, and taking thread from my mother he showed her how to make this lace. He did it with an incredible swiftness. My mother was quick to learn. She was famous in the village for her handicraft skill, and the mastery of this new accomplishment was a great feather in her cap.

"In the spring when the frost broke up my father gave him peasant clothes and turned him and his comrade over to a peasant who was traveling southward and westward. They made many gestures of farewell, and pointed southward as if there lay their home. They went away and were never seen again. But my mother did not forget the lace-making, and soon the women of our village were famous for it."

I examined the pattern of it again, with a disquieting sense that here was a clue to something. It was very like a familiar design of French lace. A sort of bastard Duchesse—unquestionably French—

With a mounting excitement I began to add figures in my mind, and then in a sort of frenzy—

"You are eighty years old," I cried, "and this happened twenty years before you were born—"

"Yes," answered my grandmother placidly, "I was the youngest of twelve. It was about a hundred years ago—"

"Well, don't you see—" I cried, hardly able to constrain myself, overwhelmed by a sudden sense of continuity. "Don't you see that these were men from Napoleon's army—drifting pieces from the army shattered at Moscow—These men were French—"

My grandmother looked at me uncomprehendingly. "These men were from the south and they returned. The never told us how or from where they came to us."

"But you have heard of Napoleon—and how he set all Europe on fire—and the defeat at Moscow—"

My grandmother shook her head. She had never heard of Napoleon!

The incredible romance of it. That here in this pocket of a New York flat there should roll up the backwash from that tidal wave. Incredible too that two refugees in a remote village unconscious of the philosophies of history should have gone on performing the business of conquest with more success and dispatch than the great generals in Moscow had achieved.

The amazing adventure of it that this bit of lace should have kept its secret for me with my American

public school education to unravel—that in it lay my authentic personal contact with a huge movement in history. I touched it as though it were alive, as though under it the huge forces of history stirred in their sleep. How could I make my grandmother see the immense enterprise it embodied? But of what advantage that she should see it? Its historical significance would not seem even faintly important to her.

"It was the ambition of Napoleon to rule the world," I began telling the story simply, "and he brought about the greatest war the world has known to make Europe French—"

"There was no war in our village," said my grandmother. "I do not know if these men were French. They were foreigners. But," she added with pride, "it is only in our part of Russia that they can make lace like this."

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