

Far and Near

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The Fairy Needle

A LITTLE seamstress sat pale and weary over her work. The Autumn wind sighed as it went by her window; the rain pattered drearily on the dead leaves upon the sill; the skies looked greyly down over the sullen city and through the narrow casement where she sat; and upon the silken embroidery in her lap lay a newly-fallen tear.

'I am so tired,' murmured the little seamstress, lifting her head and closing her burning eyes for rest. 'Stitch after stitch, stitch after stitch; a thread over here, a thread under there, a thread through beyond; continual work for the fingers, eternal idleness for the brain; I hate it, oh I hate it! Would Heaven my needle were a wand in my hands, that I might wield it only for my pleasure!'

'So be it then from this day forth!' breathed a compassionate voice in her ear; and lo, by her side stood a wonderful fairy-form, as dim and vaguely beautiful as a dream, robed in a grey shadow and crowned with a rainbow crown. The little seamstress looked questioningly at the fairy as at a vision of olden days, and the fairy smiled lovingly back, and stooping, kissed her eyes, and kissed the needle in her work, and kissed her little worn hands, and kissed her twice upon the heart, and whispered: 'I am Remembrance, and I have given thee my wand. Weave the thoughts of thy heart into the labor of thy hands, and thy toil shall become thy joy.'

Even while speaking the vision faded softly away into the shadow; only the quiver as of a dewdrop lay on the floor where its foot had touched, and the glint as of a sunbeam there where had been its crown, and the little seamstress was alone as before with her work. She took up the needle again bravely, and bent once more to her task; and lo! as she worked, the wind died down, the rain ceased and a gleam of sunlight shot into the room. It was suddenly summer around her, and her heart grew light, and a smile stole to her lips. Stitch, stitch, stitch went the busy needle along the intricate pattern; but the needle was Remembrance, and the thread her life-history, and as she worked she was weaving a living picture of her past upon the cloth.

Stitch, stitch, stitch. The needle was a slender boat, and she was on a blue lake among the close lily-pads. Early morning lay red upon the heavens; all was utterly still, and the lilies lifted their pearl-white brows and looked at her in sweet surprise. And the boat glided on and on over the green lily-pads, and they whispered audibly: 'Hush—hush—hush—sh—sh,' as if the world were at its matin prayer and might not be disturbed.

Stitch, stitch, stitch. The needle was a staff within her hand, and she was climbing a steep mountain-side, where was neither road nor path, through dew-wet ferns and diamond-tipped grasses, and high walls of silvery interlacing leaves, over stones soft with moss or slippery with carpets of odorous pine. And she went up and up through it all—through the stillness and the shaded lights and the cool dews (oh how fast the needle flew on its eager way!), and there

was music about her as she went (in the air or in her soul?), and now she stood on the summit and all the world was at her feet, and she breathed a wider, purer air, and was dumb for very happiness.

Stitch, stitch, stitch. The needle was a boat again upon a shining river, and she was borne by a swift current through a wonderful forest of reeds. Fast glided the boat along, and the tall reeds bowed and courteseyed and made obeisance as she passed, like serfs before a monarch. It was a triumphant march. No little weary seamstress was she now, winning her day's bread with long hours of lonely labor. Now she was queen, crowned with the splendor of a fair high noon, and borne in glory through wide ranks of adoring subjects. How they bent their proud heads and swayed their graceful forms, and did her finest homage! It was heart-stirring only to hear the 'swish-swish' behind her, like a slow rustle of silken trains in her wake. And one tall reed, the very last, bolder than the rest, stooped nearest and kissed her on the cheek as if in farewell as she went.

Stitch, stitch, stitch. The needle was a tiny red rose, and she gathered it out of the morning dew and fastened it on the breast of a gallant young knight, and he smiled silently down into her eyes as she stood there by his side, till her white lids drooped beneath his gaze and shut in the sweetness of his look close to her heart and held it there long after he was gone.

Stitch, stitch, stitch. The needle was a laughing, dancing, dimpling stream. Bright Undine faces flashed up from its sparkling depths. Kühleborn's white mantle hung over it mist-like in the distance. The Erl-king's grey daughters stood shadowy and vague along its banks. And softly over its waters rang the sweet voice of the Loreley, where she sat dipping her white feet in the whiter foam, and flinging her gold locks out towards the more golden sun, and singing, singing, singing her wonderful syren song.

Stitch, stitch, stitch. The needle was a face. And the eyes said: 'Love, I love thee.' And the lips said: 'Love, oh, love me!' And the brow said: 'Love, I am worthy of thy love.'

Stitch, stitch, stitch. The needle was a sword, and it sheathed itself in her heart, and her heart bled.

Stitch, stitch, stitch. The needle was a star glittering in the blue dome of heaven. She sat alone, and night was upon her, and darkness held her spirit mute. And the star said: 'Look up. God is in the night. Beauty is in the night. Joy is in the night as in the day.' And she looked up and saw the star, and felt the holy charm of the hour, and knew there was no time so dark that it was not also beautiful and good.

Stitch, stitch. The needle paused. The work was done, and the little seamstress laid it down with a sweet light shining in her eyes. 'Finished so soon! Can I ever part with it now?' she murmured.

And ladies came and examined it, and praised its delicacy, its finish, its exceeding beauty of design. 'It is brodered with pearls,' they said. 'Was ever anything so rare, so exquisite!'

And the little seamstress smiled softly and held her peace. She knew that the thoughts she had woven in with her needle were the true pearls, and those the world could not see. The others were only glass.

GRACE DENIO LITCHFIELD.