Lydia Sigourney

TO A SHRED OF LINEN

Would they swept cleaner!—
Here's a littering shred
Of linen left behind—a vile reproach
To all good housewifery. Right glad am I,
That no neat lady, train'd in ancient times
Of pudding-making, and of sampler-work,
And speckless sanctity of household care,
Hath happened here, to spy thee. She, no doubt,
Keen looking through her spectacles, would say,
"This comes of reading books:"—or some spruce beau,
Essenc'd and lily-handed, had he chanc'd
To scan thy slight superfices, 'twould be
"This comes of writing poetry."—Well—well—
Come forth—offender!—hast thou aught to say?
Canst thou by merry thought, or quaint conceit,
Repay this risk, that I have run for thee?
——Begin at alpha, and resolve thyself
Into thine elements. I see the stalk
And bright, blue flower of flax, which erst o'erspread
That fertile land, where mighty Moses stretch'd
His rod miraculous. I see thy bloom
Tinging, too scantly, these New England vales.
But, lo! the sturdy farmer lifts his flail,
To crush thy bones un pitying, and his wife
With 'kerchief'd head, and eyes brimful of dust,
Thy fibrous nerves, with hatchel-tooth' divides.
——I hear a voice of music—and behold!
The ruddy damsels singeth at her wheel,
While by her side the rustic lover sits.
Perchance, his shrewd eye secretly doth count

1. A hatchel or heckle was a tool used for combing flax.
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The mass of skeins, which, hanging on the wall, 
Increaseth day by day. Perchance his thought, 
(For men have deeper minds than women—sure!) 
Is calculating what a thrifty wife 
The maid will make; and how his dairy shelves 
Shall groan beneath the weight of golden cheese, 
Made by her dexterous hand, while many a keg 
And pot of butter, to the market borne, 
May, transmigrated, on his back appear, 
In new thanksgiving coats. 

Fain would I ask, 
Mine own New England, for thy once loved wheel, 
By sofa and piano quite displac’d. 
Why dost thou banish from thy parlor-hearth 
That old Hygeian harp, whose magic rul’d 
Dyspepsia, as the minstrel-shepherd’s skill 
Exorcis’d Saul’s ennu? There was no need, 
In those good times, of callisthenics, sure, 
And there was less of gadding, and far more 
Of home-born, heart-felt comfort, rooted strong 
In industry, and bearing such rare fruit, 
As wealth might never purchase. 

But come back, 
Thou shred of linen. I did let thee drop, 
In my harangue, as wiser ones have lost 
The thread of their discourse. What was thy lot 
When the rough battery of the loom had stretch’d 
And knit thy sinews, and the chemist sun 
Thy brown complexion bleach’d? 

Methinks I scan 
Some idiosyncrasy, that marks thee out 
A defunct pillow-case.—Did the trim guest, 
To the best chamber usher’d, e’er admire 
The snowy whiteness of thy freshen’d youth 
Feeding thy vanity? or some sweet babe 
Pour its pure dream of innocence on thee?

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Say, hast thou listen’d to the sick one’s moan, 
When there was none to comfort?—or shrunk back 
From the dire tossings of the proud man’s brow? 
Or gather’d from young beauty’s restless sigh 
A tale of untold love? 

Still, close and mute!— 
Wilt tell no secrets, ha?—Well then, go down, 
With all thy churl-kept hoard of curious lore, 
In majesty and mystery, go down 
Into the paper-mill, and from its jaws, 
Stainless and smooth, emerge.—Happy shall be 
The renovation, if on thy fair page 
Wisdom and truth, their hallow’d lineaments 
Trace for posterity. So shall thine end 
Be better than thy birth, and worthier bard 
Thine apotheosis immortalise.