

A Woman and Her Fiddly Bits

Beaumont, Texas

September 1912



Heavy footsteps stomped up the front steps and resonated into the parlor. Cecile Barnes laid her fountain pen down and shoved her leather-bound diary into the middle of the scrap bag sitting on the floor beside her. She picked up the wooden embroidery hoop framing a colorful crazy quilt square and grabbed the needle as if she'd been stitching all afternoon.

Her husband, William, hung his bowler hat on the oak coat tree inside the doorway. He removed his jacket and gave it a brief flounce before hanging it on the arm next to the hat. Shaking his head in annoyance, he settled in on the davenport across the room from Cecile. "Sitting with needle and thread again? Have you nothing better to do?"

Cecile had admired her handsome husband when he'd entered the room. With their newfound wealth, he had turned into quite the dapper dresser. But his caustic remarks brushed those thoughts to the wayside. She bit back a quick retort, took a deep breath, and replied, "Today was Women's Club day, but the meetings were canceled for the rest of the month. Ada has influenza, so we're giving her house a wide berth. Decided to do a little needlework instead."

"What's new about that? Seems you always have a needle and cloth in hand anymore." He closed his eyes and leaned his head back on the tatted antimacassar that laid across the back of the sofa. "We were a few workers short in the field today. Several of the fellas are down with influenza too. Manager's about run ragged trying to keep up with the oil production. May have to hire more men if this well keeps coming in so strong."

Jabbing her needle into the velvet cloth, Cecile fought back her irritation. Oil, oil, oil. He complained about her always doing her stitchery, but all he talked about was that nasty substance that dominated the whole city of Beaumont. She remembered what it was like growing up there before the population exploded and changed everyone's lives. It was no wonder she buried herself in her sewing. There was something comforting about working repetitive stitches, binding unrelated fabrics together into an elegant, creative whole.

Making the last featherstitch on the row, she pulled the thread to the back, knotted it, and snipped it off, leaving just a smidgeon of a tail. She softly stroked the line she'd just finished, admiring how much neater her stitches looked now, as opposed to a few years ago when she first learned this technique called crazy quilting.

She'd didn't enjoy sewing before. Oh, she could perform the task if need be. Most of her clothes and the children's clothes she tailored herself. Especially in the earlier days when money wasn't as free flowing. But she never got any satisfaction out of the countless hours sitting at the

treadle Singer. Not like now. She peeked in her sewing basket, thinking about what color embroidery floss to use on the next seam and which contrasting stitch she should use. Maybe the corner between the burgundy velvet and the indigo sateen would be a nice place to put the spider web. She didn't have that motif worked into any of her squares yet.

“Cecile?”

Her head jerked up as she realized that William was speaking to her. “Yes?”

“I've been talking to you, and you haven't heard a single word I've said. Your head is off in the clouds again, not paying attention to me.”

“Sorry, dear. I hadn't—

“I'd *asked* you where the children were.”

“Bertha, Charles, and Susanna are off playing, of course. You know they take off like a flash once they're home from school and changed out of their good school clothes. They'll be home by supper. They always are. Meredith is upstairs with the nanny. Probably napping.”

“What *is* for supper? I'm famished.”

“You'd have to ask Esther. I don't recall what menu we decided on this morning. You do remember that Mother is dining with us tonight?”

“Oh, bother. I'd forgotten that. The old harridan—”

“William!”

“Sorry. That slipped out. But you know it bothers me to no end to hear her prattle on as she does.”

Later that evening, her husband's words echoed in her ears as Cecile listened to her mother harping about her neighbors, the grocer, the postmaster—just about anyone and anything

that crossed her path was cause for her ire. She even complained about Mrs. Otis, the elderly woman living next door to Cecile and William.

“What’s Mrs. Otis done now?” Cecile queried.

“I was walking up the lane, coming here for supper tonight. She was wandering about her yard, clipping a basketful of roses. I yelled hello and waved. She never even had the grace to be friendly. Went about her business with her nose in the air like she never saw me.”

“Maybe she didn’t hear you. She is getting on in years now and—I”

“Nonsense! She heard me quite clearly. I know she did. Just her snobbery because she lives in this neighborhood and I don’t. Even though I am your mother. That should count for something.”

Cecile doubted that was the case but didn’t feel like battling over it. She wondered if her mother had always been cantankerous, and she’d never noticed, or if it was getting worse with age.

Fortunately, the three older children were on their best behavior and barely made a peep throughout the meal. Charles started to speak up at one point, and it was a race to see who stared him down first—his father or his grandmother. He caught their piercing glares and clamped his mouth shut, never to speak again during the meal. Meredith, being only three years old, hadn’t learned proper company etiquette yet, so she ate upstairs with the nanny. Cecile giggled at the thought and wondered if Meredith wasn’t the lucky one. She peeked in Mother’s and William’s direction to see if they’d noticed her mirth.

When their plates were devoid of roasted chicken and diced carrots, William pushed his chair back. Cecile jumped up and began to pick up plates and utensils.

Mother piped up. “Sit down. Let Esther do that.”

“It’s alright, Mother. I can certainly remove some dishware.”

“Sit down and behave like a proper mistress of the home. You shouldn’t be doing the duties of the paid help.”

Years of obeying her mother’s sharp instructions jumped to the forefront. It was as if Cecile were eleven years old again. No matter that her own oldest daughter, Bertha, was that age now. Cecile reverted to the obedient child, trying not to displease a stern parent.

Cecile’s temples throbbed by the time they bid her mother good evening and the children were tucked into bed. She sat at her vanity, brushing her waist length hair. When she finished the hundredth stroke, diligently counted every night, she turned to where nightshirt clad William had just climbed into the four-poster bed. “Do you ever miss the days of when we were newly married? Before children? Before so many responsibilities? Before oil?”

His nostrils flared with a snort. “You mean the days when we rubbed our pennies together and wondered if we’d have enough for our next meal? The days when we wore our clothes to threadbare because we couldn’t afford a new pair of trousers or a new frock? Absolutely not. Not for a second.” Furrows of a frown etched across his brow. “Why? You can’t tell me you do.”

Cecile laid her brush down beside the silver plated mirror. “Actually, I do. I miss the nights when we sat in the parlor chatting until the lamp burned low on kerosene. When Beaumont wasn’t burgeoning at the seams. When the city wasn’t filled with the stench of oil.”

“That *stench* of oil, as you call it, has provided nicely for you and our family. I dress like a gentleman and am the boss in the field. It’s a lucrative business. It bought this fine home. It allows you to sit and dabble with your needle and thread. It keeps us all in fine clothing. It pays for your kitchen help, so you don’t have to be a scullery maid providing three meals a day for a

growing family. It pays for your nanny so you can spend the day with your charitable organizations instead of chasing a toddler around the house or pushing her in a pram everywhere you go.”

He paused from his righteous sermon and drew in a deep breath of air. “What brought on this vein of thought suddenly? We have such a comfortable life now. How can you wish for the days we had before?”

“Some days I miss life like it used to be. Why, when I’m shopping in Conner’s, I’m pressed elbow to elbow with a store full of women. Sometimes I miss the simpler days that we used to have. I miss—” She glanced at her husband’s steely face and stopped the conversation mid-sentence. Living with an angry husband was just as bad—or worse—than living with an upset mother. She turned down the wick until the flame flickered out and crawled into bed.

William never even noticed he hadn’t finished her thought. She turned on her side, facing away from her spouse, and lay there wide awake, long after Williams snores reverberated about the room.

The next day, Esther poked her head in the parlor, where Cecile sat embroidering daisies in the corner of a satin square. “Ma’am. Miss Nell is here to see you.”

Cecile jabbed her needle into the fabric, tossed her hoop onto the side table, and jumped up to greet her friend. Nell darted around Esther, who sported a staunch glare, and rushed to give Cecile a hug.

“Sit, sit.” Cecile motioned towards the matching armchair on the opposite side of the circular oak table. She glanced towards Esther who lingered in the doorway. “Esther, a cup of hot tea for our guest, please.” Turning back to face Nell, she burst into a flurry of words. “It’s

been ages since I've seen you. What *have* you been up to? I'm so glad you stopped by. I simply need someone to talk to. I—"

"Need some advice about what fancy stitch to use next?"

A blank look crossed Cecile's face until she recognized Nell's attempt at humor and laughed. "From you? My friend that wouldn't know how to thread a needle even if the mayor beat down your door and demanded that you do it? No, my dear friend, your finesse with the finer parts of being a woman aren't going to win you any prizes—or any husbands—as I see it."

"Fine by me. I have no desire to be chained to a house producing a child every year while my husband flies freely about town making decisions, and then marching in the house to make the rules. No, I've got different opinions on the subject of matrimony than you."

She paused to accept a cup and saucer from Esther. Picking up the delicate china cup, she started to drink then hastily pursed her lips as the hot liquid scalded her tongue. It joined Cecile's crazy quilt square on the table before she excitedly continued.

"I stopped by to tell you. I'm going to New York City at the end of the month."

"What fun! A shopping excursion with your mother?" A twinge of jealousy shot through Cecile like a hot poker.

"No. A march. A women's suffragette march. I purchased my train ticket this morning. When I go home, I'll start packing my trunk. I'm so excited. The march is planned for May sixth."

Cecile's green streak of envy faded. "Oh, that's not near as exciting as what I thought you had planned. I pictured you arriving home with an entirely new, fashionable wardrobe. I can just imagine the fine hats you could find at the milliner's there."

A curtain of wistfulness fell over Cecile. “Remember when we’d spend hour— days— debating over our attire? Trying to catch the fella’s eyes? Now...” Cecile spread her hands over her skirts. “Nowadays it doesn’t even matter what I wear. No one sees me anyway. It’s like I’m invisible.”

“How can you say that? You’re still a beautiful woman. Even after birthing those four delightful children of yours.”

“Not that anyone else would say that. The children wouldn’t. I’m like an object in the room that they only notice when they need it and its not there. William certainly wouldn’t. I think he only notices when I do something to upset the apple cart. I wish...oh, I don’t know what I wish. Some days I long for times to be like they were before. Back when life was uncomplicated. William and I were happy. After we were first married, he used to court me and bring me flowers for no reason. Oil hadn’t come to Beaumont. Some days I rue the day that Spindletop blew eleven years ago. Life has never been the same since.”

“Eleven years ago? It’s been that long?”

“Exactly eleven years, four months ago.”

Nell’s mouth dropped open and her eyes widened, decorous behavior or not. She looked around, bent her head down as if searching for something elusive. “You have a hidden calendar I can’t see? How is it that you know that number off the top of your head?”

“Because it blew three days shy of our first anniversary. Our anniversary was January thirteenth. We married in 1900. I was so excited about celebrating. I had a special meal planned. And then, Spindletop started gushing oil. I remember William racing home when he heard the news, chattering a mile a minute about the oil flying into the sky, a hundred and fifty feet high.

Then he dashed to the oil field and I hardly saw him until they brought the well under control—nine long days later.”

“I remember when that happened. The newspapers kept saying we were a ‘boomtown.’ Beaumont’s population tripled. In what, just a few months?”

“Something like that. I know within the year they said hundreds of oil companies formed—around 500, I think. And almost 300 wells were producing. William’s wells were only five of the hundreds. Then, the children started arriving, and now William is gone well until dark.”

“But you have this beautiful home now. Thanks to oil.”

Cecile sighed. “I know. That’s what William keeps reminding me of. But some days I’d give anything to step back in time and be where we were eleven years ago—*before* oil.”

Usually, Nell’s bright spirits and spunky attitude brought a sparkle to Cecile’s day. Today’s visit had the opposite effect, deepening Cecile’s melancholy mood. After Nell departed, Cecile tried working on her quilting project. She didn’t receive any calm or peace from her stitches. Her mind flitted about, searching for causes of her dispirited feelings. She wandered over to the desk and retrieved her diary from where she’d hidden it in the back of the drawer. Maybe writing out her thoughts would bring some clarity to her thinking.

The days turned into weeks. Cecile quilted. She penned her innermost thoughts. The children didn’t notice anything different with their mother’s attitude. Cecile didn’t feel like they needed her anymore. They were getting older. Not that the three oldest at 8, 9, and 11 years old were *that* old. But they went to school. They did their sums and their handwriting. They played

with their friends. Meredith, at three-years old, seemed more attached to her nanny than mother. Cecile expected that was what happened when someone else provided most of the day-to-day care.

Nell stopped by for another visit the day before she departed for her grand march in New York City. “Come with me?”

“Ah, I’m tempted. I truly am. Not that I care so much about getting the vote that I’d travel all that way to go march. But to get away for a week or two sounds utterly delightful.”

“There will be thousands of other women there. All with a common cause. It might inspire you.”

“Thanks, Nell. You’re probably right. Even though I’m feeling that the children don’t need me anymore, I still couldn’t leave them for that long.”

“Cecile, think about it. Maybe a cause is what you need.”

“Maybe so. But voting? I don’t think that’s it. Now, don’t get me wrong. I do hope that the efforts are successful, and we gain the right to vote. I’d proudly march down to the polls, right next to William, and cast my ballot. I think we’ll get that right. One day. Whether or not in our lifetime, I don’t know. But that’s just not something I feel as passionate about as you do.”

When the door clicked shut behind Nell, Cecile wondered if maybe she should have taken her up on her offer. Of course, she knew how well that would have gone over with William. She remembered his response when she suggested they get one of the new bicycles’ women were starting to ride about town. No, she was not going to take on that fight.

She pulled back the lace curtain in the front window and watched Nell walk away from the house. Something tugged at her, something she’d never admit to another living soul, only her

brown leather diary. She didn't want to go to New York. She didn't want to march and advocate for women's equal rights. But sometimes...sometimes the thoughts of putting on her gloves, grabbing her parasol and satchel, and just walking away was enticing.

She'd find something. Something that would soothe this gnawing ache in her soul. She just wasn't sure what it would be. So, she kept creating out of the ordinary quilt squares, spending countless hours holding a wooden hoop filled with brilliant colored fabrics. And journaling—writing down her private thoughts—during the day when the children and husband weren't around. Late at night, when the family was tucked in bed, Cecile wrote with only a dim ring of light from the kerosene lamp keeping her company in the parlor that was quiet, except for the ticking of the grandfather clock in the hall. She never even heard the half hour and hourly chimes.

One afternoon, Mrs. Otis, from next door, delivered a calling card inviting Cecile to afternoon tea. 'My sister, Clara, visiting from Galveston, would love your company for the afternoon,' she'd written on the back.

Cecile didn't really feel like being sociable. Yet, with the Women's Club meetings still on hold, she felt she could be charitable and friendly for an hour or two.

When she stepped inside Mrs. Otis' home and saw the black and white habit the guest was wearing, Cecile remembered a conversation from several years back. She had forgotten Mrs. Otis' sister had married the Catholic Church and truly was a Sister.

Cecile pasted a neutral expression on her face and joined to two ladies in the parlor. Mrs. Otis introduced the two, and Cecile's bland look never gave away the fact that she was startled when she'd first noticed the Sister's attire.

The ladies chatted about vague topics as they navigated safe, social conversation. Soon the discussion turned to Cecile's children. Sister Clara volunteered that she was around children all day, as she was one of the nuns at the St. Mary's Orphanage in Galveston.

"Is the orphanage still there?" Cecile asked. "I thought they'd lost it in the Great Storm."

Although it had been twelve years since the tragic hurricane hit the Galveston coast, it was still remembered as one of the worst tragedies. It left more than 6,000 men, women, and children dead in its wake. Among the dead were 10 Sisters and 90 children from St. Mary's Orphans Asylum.

"We rebuilt. As did most of Galveston. I came on staff in 1902 when they built a brick building at the new orphanage site. The little tykes. It aches my heart to see the youngest ones crying in their beds at night, missing their parents who will never hold them again."

They talked of the children for a short time. When Mrs. Otis served a delicious pound cake, covered with luscious strawberries, the talk turned to food.

"What beautiful berries," Cecile exclaimed. "How did you ever get such nice berries this time of year?"

A proud smile removed years from Mrs. Otis's countenance. "Why, it was nothing. All I had to do was open a pint jar from the shelf. The harvest was bountiful this year. I must have preserved two dozen jars this summer, if not more."

"They're lovey. You must have the knack. When I can them, they end up a mashed mess. Not so lovely as these."

"Now, dear, don't berate yourself. After all, I've been at it a few more years than you have. Besides, maybe my preserving skills are a mite better than yours, but my quilting prowess

doesn't hold a candle to yours. Why, your quilts with your precise stitches and precious fiddly bits sewn in are magnificent. You put my handiwork to shame."

And with that lead-in, the three women were off and discussing sewing, quilts, and Cecile's favorite subject—crazy quilts.

"You're a quilter?" Sister Clara asked. "That's something we can never get enough of in the orphanage. Warm quilts for the children. If you ever end up with any worn or threadbare ones you have no further use for, we'd gladly take them and find a good use for them."

The gears in Cecile's brain began spinning. "You know they couldn't be crazy quilts. Those are simply too time consuming."

Sister Clara shook her head. "Of course not. Certainly, more ornate than the children need. They only require simple quilts to keep them warm."

"I could piece together a few nine-patch coverlets. Those are always nice, and they work up so quickly. How long are you visiting?"

"I return home Friday."

"Oh, dear. So soon? I couldn't possibly have any completed by then."

"No need. Whenever any are done, I know that they'd be much appreciated at any time."

Mrs. Otis' head swiveled back and forth between the two women, following their conversation. She clapped her hands in delight. "I have a trip planned to the bay in December. I could take them with me. That is—if you make any."

Cecile couldn't wait for teatime to finish up. She rushed home and went straight upstairs to the trunk where she kept her fabrics and scraps. She pulled out the velvets, silks, and satins she used in the crazy quilts and sat them at the foot of the bed.

Soon, a pile of the more ordinary fabrics in the middle of the bed matched the height of the nicer fabrics she was saving. Cottons, flannels, denim scraps and some homespun fabric from who knows where threatened to tip over and fall off the bed. Pieces of old dresses Bertha and Susanna wore out that were too tattered for Meredith to grow into joined the pile. Charles shirts that he'd ripped in ways only little boys can, topped off the mound.

The rest of the afternoon passed as Sarah sorted and cut out four-inch squares. That evening, instead of pulling out her delicate handiwork, she sat at the treadle machine—the one she despised—and sewed the squares into nine-patch squares. Leftover solid fabrics made a banding between the squares. Before Esther rang the meal bell, Cecile had a quilt top pieced together. It was small but was the perfect size to fit on the little beds she imagined the youngsters had at the orphanage.

By the end of the week, she had six tops pieced, sewn and ready to start the quilting and binding process. She was confident she could sew and quilt them into completed projects by the time Mrs. Otis went to Galveston for holiday.

One afternoon Cecile sat in her sewing room, basting three layers of a quilt together. A shadow crossed her light. She looked up to see Bertha standing in front of her.

“Mother?”

“Yes, dear.”

“Could you teach me how to sew too?”

“Of course, I can.” Cecile tried not to let her surprise show on her face. She thought if she did, that Bertha would bolt and not want to learn any more. “Is there anything special you'd like to learn to sew?”

“A quilt, like you are. I want to make one for a girl that doesn’t have a mother. Because I do have a mother, and I’m so lucky.”

Tears welled in Cecile’s eyes. She batted her eyes, trying to keep them contained and reached out and hugged Bertha.

After that, their afternoon routine consisted of mother and oldest daughter sewing together. Meredith never noticed. She spent her days playing with Nanny. Charles didn’t notice. He spent his afternoons running about with ‘the boys.’

Occasionally, Bertha played with her friends. But many days she spent learning how to pick and cut fabrics and how to operate her mom’s treadle sewing machine. Cecile’s heart felt as if it were bursting with love and pride as she watched Bertha’s golden ringlets bobbing while bent over her newfound pastime.

When Cecile wrote in her diary these days, the sentiments she penned were far different from those in days past. Her diary entries were now testaments of a life that felt fulfilled; it was no longer the outlet for a sad and lonely heart.

One afternoon, Bertha stopped sewing mid-seam and interrupted Cecile, who was hand stitching the final border seam on one of the quilts destined for the orphanage.

“Mother? How come all of these quilts are so plain?”

“Plain? What do you mean? I think they’re quite lovely.” Cecile stuck her needle in the quilt she was working on and opened it up across her lap. “Why, just look at all these vibrant colors. Reds and blues and violets. Look here—this is from the dress you wore the first day of school.”

“I don’t mean the colors or fabrics. But compared to your other quilts, they’re just square and plain and boring. And no pretty sparklies on it like your other quilt squares.”

Understanding cut through Cecile’s confusion. “You mean not like my crazy quilts with all my fiddly bits?”

“Exactly. And what does fiddly bits mean anyway? You always call them that.”

Cecile leaned back in her chair and cupped her chin with one hand, deep in thought. “Why, you know, I’ve never really thought about it. One of the ladies in my quilting club called them that one time, and we’ve all just taken to using the same term.”

“Sounds like a silly name to me.”

Cecile smiled and nodded. “I suppose you’re right. But, thinking about it, the word ‘fiddly’ often refers to something that is difficult to do or use because it involves small, complicated objects. And what we’re using on the quilts—little small pieces like the beads and the charms—could be called bits. So, fiddly bits. Makes sense, I guess, because it is tedious and challenging to sew all those teeny tiny bits onto the quilt.”

Bertha turned from the treadle machine to face her mother, her golden ringlets bouncing on her back. She appeared to be deep in thought. “Does it take you a lot of time to sew on all those tiny beads and charms?”

“Absolutely. Hours and hours. Why, sometimes I’ve worked weeks on one single block.”

Disappointment crossed Bertha’s face and sagged her shoulders downward. “So, we wouldn’t have time to do that kind of handiwork on these quilts for the orphanage, would we?”

“Gracious no. We’ll be lucky to finish a good trunkful of small quilts in time for Christmas. Even plain, simple quilts like these—with no extra adornment.”

Bertha went back to sewing straight seams on the machine without another word. Cecile picked up her needle and started working on her blind stitches again. The silence was broken only by the whirling sound of the treadle and the belt moving the machine. Cecile began to wonder what had prompted Bertha's line of questioning. She wondered a bit more, then finally paused her handiwork again.

"Pray tell, why were you asking about the fiddly bits? You sounded concerned about the quilts being too plain. Is there a reason?"

Bertha's feet stopped pumping the treadle. She allowed the machine to slow to a halt before turning back to her mother. "As we've been working on these, I keep thinking about all the little children at the orphanage. They're all there together, but they don't have any parents or family. I felt sad and wished we could make prettier quilts, like the ones you make."

Understanding shot through Cecile and filled her with warmth. She felt a rush of immense love directed towards her compassionate daughter. "I know, dear. I wish we could do that too. But we simply don't have enough time. I'd rather many of the children get a new quilt over only one or two."

Bertha sat quietly, thinking, but not talking.

Cecile let her take her time. It was as if she could see the gears whirling about in her daughter's brain.

After some deep thought, Bertha's eyes lit up. "Mother? If there's not time to make a lot of fancy quilts, do you suppose there's enough time that I could make some special squares and sew one pretty square in several different quilts?"

Cecile pretended to give the idea some thought. She wanted to rush right in and agree with Bertha's notion. Yet, she was so impressed by her daughter's maturity and thought about

this project, she wanted to emphasize the back and forth nature of this conversation to encourage future exchanges between the two of them.

After her mock consideration, she finally answered. “Your idea has merit. I applaud your ingenuity and your desire to brighten a lonely child’s day. I believe that would be possible. Let’s work out how we could accomplish this.”

She stood and motioned for Bertha to follow her to the table where they cut and lay out the fabrics. “Do you know what you’d like to do? Do you know how to do some of the handwork that you’d need to know to complete a fancier square? Do you have any fiddly bits in mind that you’d like to include?”

Bertha pointed to the pattern of cut out squares that were laid out in a methodical order in front of them. “I was thinking we could do it all like this. Like we’ve been making. Except...” She reached over and pulled out a solid six-inch square from a lower corner. “...instead of this one being a solid blue cotton fabric, I was thinking I could use one of your nicer fabrics. Maybe a piece of black velvet? And I could sew a design of pretty flowers on it, and maybe use a few of your sparkly glass beads too?”

Cecile hesitated, and then nodded. “It could work. You’d have to have the special squares made up by the time we got to this point. Those may take you several afternoons of solid stitching to get ready. Are you up for more hours spent in a chair stitching?”

“I am, Mother. I know it will be hard work. But I keep thinking of some little girl getting a new quilt and having a really pretty piece to run her fingers over and see something bright and shiny as she laid down to go to bed without a mother to tuck her in.”

And with that, the occasional afternoons of the two sewing together moved into a new routine. Bertha studiously tackled her new project with dedication and intent. She became an apt pupil of the art of handiwork, learning new stitches every week.

She learned to create flowers and bouquets from daisy stitches, straight stitches, and French knots. She learned which new stitches made the best leaf designs. She learned how to sew a satin stitch to create vibrant ribbons of color to wrap around the flowers. And when her mother opened her bead box to share some of the loot with Bertha, why, the little eleven-year-old girl became as enraptured with her stitchery as her mother was. She took a small basket to school with her each day. When the other pupils ran about at their lunch recess, Bertha ate as fast as she could to start stitching on one of her ‘pretty squares.’

The next two months flew by. As the two spent more time together, Bertha began sharing more with her mother. Cecile didn’t feel invisible anymore. She didn’t know what made her feel better—developing this closer bond with her daughter or the satisfaction she received from making the quilts for the motherless orphans.

As the sun set earlier each day and they had to light the lamps earlier to see, the pile of completed quilts in the sewing room grew taller and taller.

One day in early December, Mrs. Otis stopped over for a visit. Esther showed the guest into the parlor, where Cecile worked on a crazy quilt square secured taut in an embroidery hoop. “I wanted to let you know I’m leaving for Galveston Tuesday. Did you have any quilts to send to the orphanage?”

Grinning like a Cheshire cat, Cecile laid her project down on the davenport and stood. “Come look and see what Bertha and I have ready to go.”

She led the way upstairs to the sewing room. Opening the door, she pointed to the stack of completed, folded quilts. “These are all ready. There’s one more that’s almost done. We must finish the binding on it. Another night or two and it will be ready to add to the pile.”

Mrs. Otis’s jaw dropped. “I declare! I thought you’d have two or three finished to send down for the children. I never expected you’d have this many.”

“Bertha and I have been busy. She’s been a big help in this undertaking. Why, she’s worked as hard as I. Come, see what she’s made for a few special little girls.”

Cecile opened four quilts containing Bertha’s handiwork and pointed out the corner squares. “She was concerned about the quilts being too simple and not special enough. When we finish the last one, we’ll have five with a velvet square embellished with flowers, beads, and charms.”

“I’m glad I came to check. Seems I’ll be going down to Galveston with a full load.”

“We’ve got a spare trunk up in the attic. I think they’ll all fit in there. Would that help to transport them there?”

“That would be most helpful. Just keep it here. When the lorry driver picks me up next week, I’ll have him retrieve the trunk and load it up.”

“Warn your sister more is headed her way. We’ve produced a sewing demon. Bertha adores this craft. I can hardly get her to set down her needle to come eat. Next Christmas we’ll have even more for you to deliver.”

“Never fear. I go down twice a year. I can always take some with me in the summer too. Even though they wouldn’t use them then, I know Sister would tuck them in a cupboard to have ready once the cold winter settles in again.”

Over the years, Cecile lost count of how many quilts she and Bertha made and sent to the orphanage. Bertha's beautiful stitchery soon surpassed her mother's. It didn't matter. She discovered the giving of these gifts from the heart was her passion. When they sent a quilt down south, it went with an armload of hugs attached to it.

What brought the brightest smile to Cecile's face were the memories she and her daughter created together and the bond that developed between the two of them —so different from her and her own mother's relationship.

As Meredith grew, she learned to stitch and often joined them. But she didn't develop the love for stitchery Bertha had.

And Charles? He grew up with his father's same dismissive attitude about women's handicrafts.

Cecile's friend Nell was jubilant when women finally gained the right to vote in Texas. At the next election, Cecile strutted alongside her friend all the way to the ballot box.

The oil life that permeated the town of Beaumont—both in stench and in lifestyle—along with occupying the bulk of her husband's attention, wasn't a source of irritation any longer.

Cecile found her focus. Doing something worthwhile for children in need mattered. That Bertha mutually enjoyed plying a needle and thread was a benefit Cecile never expected. This also mattered.

Maybe change in life wasn't always a bad thing. The piles of completed quilts over the years, along with the pleasant and satisfied words in Cecile's diary, were proof of that.