

FIFTY YEARS AGO

Chat With an Old Time Mistress of the White House.

MEMORIES OF WEBSTER AND CLAY

Once the First Lady of the Land, Now an Inmate of the Louisa Home

—Some New Stories.

WASHINGTON, D. C., April 23, 1891.—[Special correspondence of THE HERALD.]—Nellie Arthur, Fannie Hayes, Mollie Garfield Brown and Nellie Grant Sartis are the four daughters of Presidents with whom the public is familiar and whose histories lie entirely within the last generation. Frequent newspaper mention of these young matrons and maidens serves, as it were, to keep their lives in touch with the world, and to arouse in their fortunes a steady interest. There is, however, a fifth young daughter of a United States President, but one whose days of social prominence lie beyond the shadow of the great rebellion and the stream of whose quiet life is fast approaching the shoreless sea. This lady, between whom and her youthful successors nearly fifty years of history were made, is Mrs. Letitia Tyler Semple, the daughter of President John Tyler, and the widow of the late Purser Semple of the U. S. N. This aged but still proud and elegant woman is prominent in the group of aristocratic old southern ladies who live in the Louisa Home at the capital. Though nearly eighty years of age, Mistress Semple is neither old nor enfeebled. She not only retains much of her beauty of fifty years ago, but expresses herself with the same vigor and exhibits the same constitutional conservatism as did her father before her. She is rather above the medium height and carries herself as erectly as a woman of half her years, and her face, strong face, lighted by keen but kindly brown eyes and softly framed in loose silver waves, certainly bears the years with which history credits it. The lady who has gone upon the record as among the charming young mistresses of the White House, is a representative of an old-time family and generation. She is the faithful adherent of the old regime, and as one born and reared in the traditions and creeds of the Virginia ante-bellum glory, regards with distrust and disfavor the so-called progress of these uneasy latter times. Since the death of her husband and her entrance to the Louisa Home, some thirty years ago, Mrs. Semple has been quite lost to the gay world in which she once reigned, the gay official world which she now placidly contemplates from the window of her apartment overlooking the broad, clean sweep of Massachusetts avenue and the quiet elegance of Scott's circle, where the fashionable equipages constantly roll. Here, however, in the warmth and comfort of her high-up, sunny, cherry retreat she receives the very small circle of old-time friends and the few who do visit in the reminiscent pictures of her girlhood days and its environment of great persons and events.

To hear a lady chat familiarly of Daniel Webster, of Dolly Madison and of Clay and Calhoun, clothes these intellectual factors of history with flesh and blood personality and enables one, as it were, to stake hands with her forefathers and to realize her relationship to history. Her recollections of an era when society was "dignified" when slang was unknown and a dining room accomplishment, and when "people and honor were the first tenets of a gentleman's creed," are most interesting, and her comparisons between then and now are never in favor of the present giddy age.

Referring to official society at the capital during her father's administration, Mrs. Semple said: "Society was then a very different thing from now. Women leaned upon men as their protectors and guardians, and a gentleman of those days regarded as his first duty the care of his wife and children and his mother and sisters. The progressive woman, that dreadful outgrowth of the war and the upheaval of society, had never been heard of. Women then desired to be good wives and mothers, and were not men either in thought or in deed, and were ever conversing their Bibles, which admonishes women to silence in public.

"Progress is not always advancement," concluded this lady with emphasis, and passing from this she compared the manners of to-day with those of former times, spoke derogatorily of the modern methods of fashionable entertainment and deplored the crowded, ill-regulated and purely showy character of the present fashionable reception, tea or luncheon. "In those days," she said, "a drawing-room entertainment was something more than a mere display of gaudy and expensive, but merely to cancel obligations. It was a cordial and orderly affair; the young gentlemen were called upon to look out for the pleasure of the guests, and when supper was announced the eldest and most important persons were first led into the dining-room. Of course, the young ladies of those days, you must remember, there was but one railroad into the capital—that from Baltimore—and there were fewer states, and consequently fewer to entertain. Then the prevailing element was southern, with the repose of manner and generous hospitality which characterized plantation life in the old times."

HER LIFE AT THE WHITE HOUSE.

"When my father was made President and called me to the White House," said Mrs. Semple, who, it will be remembered, was mistress of the White House until her father's second marriage, "he gave me no other instruction or bit of advice except this: 'You must remember, he said, that in your new position you must treat all alike. You must have no favorites nor make any distinctions. I desired to meet his wishes, and following out his suggestion, had none of the usual intimate friends among young ladies, and maintained the strict neutrality between them. The code of etiquette regarding the White House has, of course, changed much since 1840. At that time the lady of the White House returned all of her first visits in person. To this she devoted three days of each week, while the other three were spent in receiving visits. Every two weeks the President held a levee, and spent every evening in the drawing-room with his family and friends. During my father's administration dancing was introduced at the White House, and the playing of the Marine band for the public entertainments was another of his innovations. The people were delighted, and great crowds would come to hear the musical selections which invariably closed with that old Virginia negro melody:

Clear the kitchen, young folks, old folks, Old Virginia never tires.

"This," said Mrs. Semple, "was an old plantation air and a favorite song when the servants used to clear the mistress' kitchen for the brookdown."

DANIEL WEBSTER ON LOVE.

Among the great personages who figured in her father's administration she spoke of Daniel Webster as one who "fulfilled his social obligations with due courtesy but with a pre-occupied air, as if unable to get away from serious subjects." "One could never forget his splendid head and noble face and those deep, serious eyes looking out rather beyond than at the family and about him. He was much more a statesman than a gallant gentleman, yet could on occasions say very happy things. When my sister Elizabeth and Mr. Waller were married at the White House some one said to Mr. Webster, who was present: 'The beauty of the White House is now carried away.' He replied at once:

'Love rules the court, the camp, the grove; Men below and heaven above. For love is heaven, and heaven is love.'

"Mr. Webster was also a very beautiful letter writer. I once read a letter written by him when in Baltimore, and the stopping on Church hill, and the theme of the letter was a service which he had that

morning witnessed. It was the most beautiful and poetical description, in fact so fine and full of sentiment that one of the gentlemen said: 'Well, if it did not happen to know he was writing up on a farm, would say that old Dan had never seen a sunrise.'

Mrs. Webster, Mrs. Semple describes as "a tall, dark, stately woman and of very elegant appearance, a very fitting mate for her distinguished husband."

Of Dolly Madison, whom she knew very well, Mrs. Semple speaks with great admiration and credits her with all the graces and qualities commonly ascribed to her. "She was a most sincere and generous person," said the lady, "who preserved her quaint Quakerish simplicity and dignity both in speech and manner, and whose modesty and plainness of dress were cordial. Mrs. Madison's dress was also modeled after the Quakerish idea, and the turban of fine white lawn, which always appeared in the pictures, was worn at all times and was very becoming to her. She distinctly remember the peculiar ornament always attached to this turban. Directly above the forehead, and securely pinned to the folds of the turban, she wore a miniature of Mr. Madison, an exquisitely painted portrait set around with pearls. Mrs. Madison was rarely seen without a little red carnation, and she drew around her shoulders and pinned Quaker fashion over her bosom."

Mrs. Semple finds nothing really progressive in the long sleeves and high collars of the women of to-day. "Decollete gowns were then the regulation evening dress, but not," she said, "in such an extreme of fashion as is often seen to-day, and the little bonnets of to-day, they affairs perched on the back of a woman's head, leaving her face exposed, making a woman look as though she wore a cap, and was not in accord with former notions of modesty and propriety."

WHY PHILIP SPENCER DIED.

The calamities which have overtaken the cabinet families of this administration recalled to Mrs. Semple a calamity that was as disagreeable as well, which had fallen upon her father's secretary of the treasury, John G. Spencer. "The secretary," she said, "was a harsh man in his family, very severe with his children, while his wife, a very gentle and peace-loving woman, was a most devoted mother and made herself the shield between the children and their father's anger. Philip, the eldest son, was a cadet at that time, and during a cruise on the brig Somers, he was detected at the head of a conspiracy to seize the vessel and transfer her into a pirate. Being out of United States water, Captain McKenney ordered a drum head court martial, and Philip Spencer with the mate and boatwain were condemned to be hanged to the yard-arm and dropped into the ocean. The captain returned at once, making a full report, and while society was terribly shocked, the captain was justified by public sentiment as well as acquitted when tried by court martial. When my sister-in-law, Mrs. Tyler, visited Mrs. Spencer in her dreadful grief, the poor mother cried: 'Oh, my poor Philip! This is the result of an over-strict father and an over-indulgent mother!' Another of his sons ran away from home, and none of his children, I believe, were a credit to him."

STONEWALL JACKSON, GRANT AND SHERIDAN AS CADETS.

Mrs. Semple referred to certain lads whom her father, a commissioned cadet, who had since risen to national prominence. Among these were Generals Grant and Sheridan and the late Admiral Porter. "It is recalled that the fact," said the old lady thoughtfully, "trying to recall the boy over fifty years of time, 'though I must have met them at some of our levees in the White House, but they were then of no more importance than the many other young men in school."

One incident relating to another historical figure of the late unpleasantness she recalled with satisfaction. "One day the doorkeeper came to my father and said: 'There is a young man out here who is very anxious to see you. He is from Lexington and has walked all the way to West Point and he brings with him a letter of introduction.' 'Show him in,' said my father, and after he had received the letter with the travel-stained young man, he sent for his private secretary, General Tyler, and said: 'Go over to Adjutant-General Jones and have a commission made out for this young man. There's a medal in his pocket. This boy was Thomas Jefferson Jackson.'

THE WHITE HOUSE MALARIA.

A reference to the sanitary condition of the White House caused this former mistress to observe smilingly: "These complaints were so old as the White House itself, and Mrs. Harrison employs such improvements as Dolly Madison never dreamed of. During our residence the canal still ran through the city, and when the south wind came you can imagine the results. Mr. Van Buren would not live there at all, and every President and family since have had more or less of malaria along with their honors."

THE CONFEDERATE AND ITS FLAG.

But the temporary novelty of the White House is evidently of much less value to this proud old lady than the more permanent glory of the Tyler family and its achievements in connection with Virginia history. It was with all the fire and fervor of youth that this daughter of old Virginia, and re-affirmed her loyalty to her state, and re-affirmed her loyalty to this discarded and despised Confederate flag. "My mother alone furnished 1,000 soldiers to the Southern Confederacy. They came from the east and west, from the north and south, and even from Europe to take up the cause of Virginia. I had not one relative who proved a traitor to Virginia. But," she continued, "the struggle between love of the Union and love of state that took place in the mind of Robert E. Lee was a universal one in the minds of Virginians. What that decision cost us, only we who had to make it will ever know. It was my father who came to the capital as a member of the peace commission, but when he was met by the reply: 'We have our foot upon the serpent of slavery and we will not get back until it is crushed,' he returned to Virginia and to her cause. We believed we had the right to secede. Why was nothing said when Massachusetts threatened to leave the Union during the trouble over Texas? No one questioned her right to go out if she wished. But," she said, "let me show you a picture of the difference between the two parties. I picture how the difference between the two authorized flag of them and those carried earlier in the war. And Mrs. Semple pointed to a faint copy in oil of the flag, a picture hung conspicuously on the wall framed in narrow band of tarnished gilt. It was a white flag on which a blue field was placed by the sprinkled bars of red, and its peculiarity was a broad band of red attached crosswise on the free end. "This flag," she explained, "without the red stripe was the original, accepted design for the Southern States when it was first displayed on the mast head, it was found that when the flag was at rest the blue field was concealed and it appeared like a flag of truce. To save time and form a notion of a flag of truce, it was hastily decided to add this red band." And so the painted shadow of a dream hangs in my lady's chamber, the ghost of a protest still awake in her heart.

Among the incidents of the earlier days of the war, Mrs. Semple relates with pride the loyalty of young Eugene Chapman, who was the father of the "Baptism of Blood," which now hangs in the rotunda of the capitol. The boy had been brought up by his father, a farmer, almost entirely abroad, and when the war broke out he was in Rome studying art. When the news reached him he threw down brush and palette, cut loose from the only life he knew, forsook his art and sailed for America. His father had taught him that love for Virginia, and it was stronger than all else.

A STORY OF PRESIDENT LINCOLN.

Mrs. Semple never knew Mrs. Lincoln, but speaks of her sister, Mrs. Platt, whom she met in Rome, as a "most charming and gracious person," with none of the eccentricities attributed to the wife of the President. Then she laughingly related an incident called up by the mention of Lincoln, which bears repeating. An old family friend of the Tylers, a Baltimorean, had gone with the Union, and near the close of the war during a visit in that city, Mrs. Semple was a little piqued that her old friend had not paid her a visit. It chanced that the morning she was leaving they met at the depot and she found that they were both there to see the outgoing train. The gentleman made his excuses for his negligence on the ground that he feared his "dilettante" might have altered her friend's ship. From this time they drifted into political affairs. The gentleman was an enthusiast.



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