

Weaving in Westchester



WEAVING IN A WESTCHESTER FARM HOUSE BY HARRIOT STANTON BLATCH

AN EPIC poem might be written about the simple folk on a sequestered Westchester farm, who work for the joy of working, who, shut off from the stream of modern industry, have clung, by family tradition, to the eighteenth century handicrafts. But as no poet has seen the varied textiles which have been woven on the hand looms in the Westchester hills, nor the simple furniture which has been made for home consumption, the utensils which have been wrought, and all in the off-hours of farm work, it becomes necessary for the matter-of-fact recorder to meet the doubt, "Is it possible?" and to take up the more up-to-date challenge, "Does it pay?"

It is a strange challenge, since all the leading economists have come to admit that the product of the housewife's energy, though not sold or paid for, is wealth. Wealth does not always mean the relation of buyer and seller. To create for oneself is perhaps one of the vital sides of the handicraft movement. At any rate, our little farm seems to suggest that truth.

If one at all understands the vitalizing effect of art, and the deadening effect of dull, continuous drudgery, one can appreciate why this farm is alive while many farms are centres of degeneracy. A scattered population cannot have theatres, concerts, museums. It can only get the inspiration of

art in its democratic form, that is, in handicraft. And that was the way in the olden time the farm population kept its blood stirring. We speak of the typical abandoned farm district as lying outside the stream of life, but, more correctly, it has been robbed of life's energizing principle. Farms cannot be in the centre of Broadway, they must lie back in thinly populated hills and dales. And they have been left, like the modern housewife, with nothing but the ephemeral occupations.

The sequestered Westchester farm house illustrates, on the other hand, all the valuable influences of creating beauty and working in joy. Life has there been reduced to the simplest forms. There are no superfluities, and, while the usual farm work is vigorously carried on, drudgery is saved at every turn. In that house there are no aimless tidies, no "throws" nor ribbons, no china dogs nor wax flowers to catch dirt and call for the use of precious hours in dusting. The meals are taken on the polished oak table, thus saving the buying and washing of tablecloths. The food is cooked in earthenware casseroles and brought to the table in the same vessels, so the buying and the washing of vegetable dishes is avoided. Utility and beauty are the watchwords. A woman turns from her stove to the loom to weave the curtains, the dress, the apron shown in the illustrations. She has time for this and leisure beside to read and think, for she has cut out of her life all that is neither useful nor beautiful. A man lays down his hoe in the heat of the day and,



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going to his bench in the corner of the old barn, hammers out merrily a copper cup. Winter means to the members of such a household a season of joy, not of hibernation. The thirst for the city never comes upon them. Does that not pay?

However, we must finally stand related to the world. Does the world want the handicraftsman? Is there any demand for the product of his labor? Experience seems to indicate that the world has grown somewhat tired of machine-made art. We are beginning to recognize that crowds of men are busy, busy long after their bones ache, making weary goods full of backache and all unloveliness, just to weigh us down. Crowds of men are busy making painful stuff painfully, and we buy it just to dust it and keep the moth out. There seems to be a genuine revolt against this. No doubt the simple life is a fad with many, but there is a bedrock of firm conviction that a few beautiful things are more satisfying than clutter. The buyer, then, is showing better taste, and that means he will demand the unique things, the product of the craftsman's skill, rather than objects turned out by the hundred on a machine.

The buyer is getting, too, a finer conscience. He wants to know where and how the goods he purchases were made. He likes to know that the things about him were hammered out or woven by a merry hearted fellow in some quiet nook of the world, rather than run out at steam pressure in some noisy, dirty factory. Conscience and taste in the buyer, then, are steadily creating a demand for the craftsman.

The movement started by Morris and Ruskin has grown, until now there are some five hundred



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centres in England where village industries are carried on. Many a man and woman is earning during the dull seasons on the farm a good living by hand work. The silk weaving of Spitalfield, the lace making of Honiton, are reviving. And it is true in America as well, that if a craftsman can make a sound and beautiful thing he can sell it. Even the little Westchester farm house, which was only producing for home consumption, had on its loom a piece of fancy stuff which caught the eye of a connoisseur. A pattern of this cotton and linen mixture was shown to a Fifth Avenue tailor, and he offered three dollars a yard for the cloth, as each yard could be woven with a slight variation, thus giving unique material for fancy waistcoats.

The main question is as to whether the craftsman is prepared to do his share towards the success of his craft. What led William Morris to train himself in six different trades was that, when his architect had finished his famous house, he could procure to put in it no beautiful modern things. He could get Indian rugs, but, as he said, he was not an East Indian and that art did not express his British taste. He could get Chippendale, but he belonged to the nineteenth century and the eighteenth century didn't express his ideas of furniture. He could get Danish china, but he was not a Dane. He was an up-to-date Englishman with vital ideas, and he fell to expressing them in wall papers, in furniture, in textiles for himself, his countrymen not being ready to give him what he wanted, as they were all tight bound to machines.

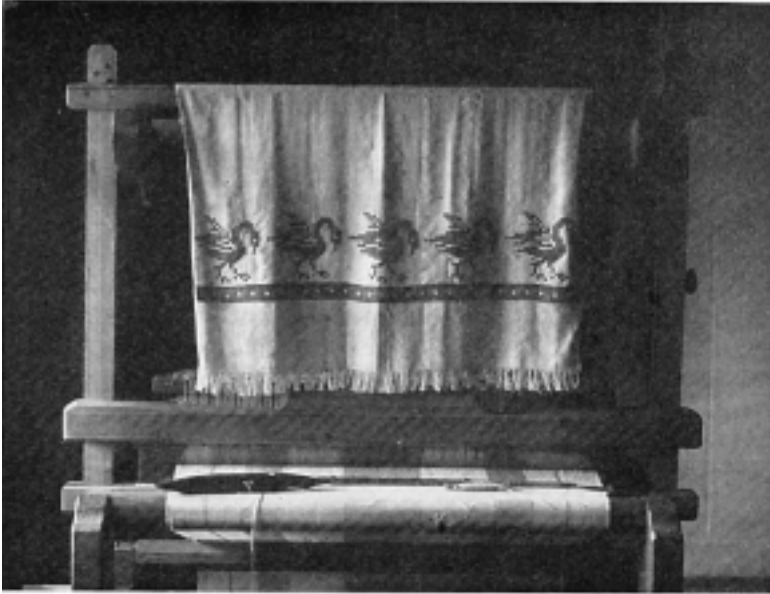
Morris's success is full of lessons for the craftsman. In the first place, he saved himself no pains in acquiring skill, and he demanded the highest skill in the workmen about him. Money, time, energy were lavishly spent to get a desired effect. The ability to take pains is the foundation of success for the handicraftsman, as of others. The



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craftsman, if, unlike the Westchester farmer, he is not creating for himself merely, must fearlessly face the fact that simply because a thing is hand-made it is not good art or good workmanship. To adopt the self-depleting motto, "we do our best," will not command success for poor work in a stirring world of hot competition.

And with the skill, the talent, the genius, must go some business ability. The craftsman too often, with the spendthrift habit of the artist, wastes material, time and energy, and then, quite illogically, puts a price on his work to cover all his squanderings. This question of price is a matter of very nice adjustment, for too many craftsmen have imbibed to the full the commercial spirit of the age and our false philosophy as to work. What the craftsman, like all ordinary mortals, needs is opportunity to express himself constantly in some form of work, and if he could keep out of his mind an over-valuation of his talent, keep clear of the commercial desire for big returns, he would place such a price on his work that customers would be attracted rather than repelled. That would be good business and wise philosophy. As human beings, we must have work; we rust out if we have not an opportunity to function on something. And what separates the artist from the drudge is that the former adds a joyous touch to the necessary. The potter, without destroying the usefulness of the utensil he moulds, makes the curves of the vessel pleasing to his eye, and then, if he is a very joyful savage, he will imprint on the soft clay a pattern

with his nail. That is art, the laughing side of work, the merry side of utility. The true artist, the real craftsman, is happy at work, and needs to express this joy continuously. He, least of all men, can bear idleness. To do is the very breath of life to him. And yet he is so in the grip of commercialism that he checks his opportunity to work, by the money greed. Instead of creating to his full capacity, he stands higgling in the market place.

Beside the buyer of taste, then, success to handicraft demands a seller who places a fair valuation on his wares, who is business-like, never

expecting that the price of the product of his skill should include the cost of the speculative ventures of his stupidities, and who, above all, is talented, and who has at least that mark of the genius, the ability to take pains.

As knotty a problem in the modern economic world as the flow of the population to the towns is the employment of the married woman. On the one side is the sound conviction that every human being should be economically independent, and yet, on the other side, how can the duties of mother and wage-earner be reconciled? In the highly specialized factory, with its expensive machinery, the hours of the employees must be fixed, their service constant. The operative must be on hand at a given hour, every day in the week, every week of the month, every month of the year. But in a handicraft shop there is no expensive steam or electric plant that must be kept running, there is no machinery that must earn interest on large sums of invested capital. The crafts shop with its greater possibilities of freedom for the worker may possibly be the solution of the problem of independence for the mother of the race.

And such a solution may carry with it an influence even more important than the solving of an economic question. Our teachers, our physicians, all our wise observers are telling us that the undermining force to-day is nervous disorders. While we all know this, and know equally well that nothing steadies nerve power like manual work, we yet regard with apparent unconcern the fact that in our