THE HISTORY AND ASSOCIATIONS OF THE ART OF SPINNING BY HAND.

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THE highest wisdom has declared that the supreme cares of men are "what we shall eat and what shall we drink and wherewithal shall we be clothed," while teaching of equal authority bids us having "food and raiment to be therewith content." That food should be man's first care is not surprising, and the first and simplest arts of men were those connected with implements of the chase. The first clothing was the skins of beasts, and in the rudest and earliest times such skins, scraped with flint, softened with grease, and sewn with tendons and bone needles, sufficed for the second great want of man. But as the race emerged from barbarism other clothing was sought, and the fibres of plants and the hair or wool of goats or sheep offered material more fit for covering. And so that necessity which the proverb declares to be invention's mother produced those crafts whose end is the turning of such fibre, whether vegetable or animal, into cloth or sheet-

* At this lecture Miss Violet Alston (daughter of the foundress of the Alston Studio of Hand Weaving and Spinning), who was attired in Greek costume, demonstrated the art of spinning in the primitive fashion with the hand spindle and distaff; Mr. Dale showed how spinning was done on an 18th century spinning wheel which he brought; and lantern slides were shown of Irish, Scotch, and Welsh women spinning, of various mediæval representations of ancient spinning, and some reproductions of famous pictures.

ing. And your material, before it reaches this stage, must pass through the two processes of spinning and weaving. That is, the fibre, be it flax, cotton, jute, wool, or goats' hair, must first be spun to make it thread, and then the threads arranged in warp and woof in the loom and woven together.

To trace the genesis of these arts has baffled all research, for they are hid deep in those early times called prehistoric. When Europe was in her age of stone, not less than 6,000 or 7,000 years ago, and the Swiss pile dwellings were made, the arts of spinning and weaving were known. Spindle whorls and weights for weaving are common objects among the stone implements of those early times. The monuments and mummies of Egypt tell us that the proverbial fine linen of that land was no fiction,* and it was there that the women who were wise-hearted learned to spin the goats' hair of which the covering of the tabernacle was made. The conquerors of Canaan, too, found the stalks of flax laid out in order on the roof of Rahab's house in Jericho, to dry, to heckle, and then to spin. It would seem also that in the palmy days of Judæa's prosperity, under its wisest and most skilful king, the simpler art of spinning was better done in Egypt than at home, for it is told us that "Solomon had horses brought out of Egypt and linen yarn. The king's merchants received the linen yarn at a price."

It was in the days of Solomon, or perhaps a little earlier, that Greece was in her heroic age, and reflected in her literature and religion are illustrations drawn from the same industry. Of the three Fates, two spin the thread of human existence, and the third, Atropos, stands ready with her shears to cut the yarn in twain. While no one surely

* Specimens were shown of the actual fine linen of Egypt brought by Professor Flinders Petrie from the proto-dynastic cemetery of Tarkand.

ever spun under such charming conditions as that fair woman who beguiled Ulysses the wanderer, and strove to retain in her fair domain him whose heart was far away in the rocky, sea-girt Isle of Ithaca.

The visit of Mercury, the messenger of the gods to Calypso's Isle, is thus described in Leigh Hunt's version of the Odyssey :

> And now arriving at the isle he springs
> Oblique, and landing with subsiding wings
> Walks to the Cavern mid the tall green rocks
> Where dwelt the Goddess with the lovely locks.
> He paused! and there came on him as he stood
> A smell of cedar and of citron wood
> That threw a perfume all about the isle,
> And she within sat spinning all the while,
> And sang a low sweet song that made him hark and smile.
> A sylvan nook it was, grown round with trees,
> Poplars and elms and odorous cypresses,
> In which all birds of ample wing, the owl
> And hawk had nests and broad-tongued waterfowl.
> The cave in front was spread with a green vine
> Whose dark red bunches almost burst with wine,
> And from four springs running a sprightly race
> Four fountains clear and crisp refreshed the place,
> While all about a meadowy ground was seen
> Of violets mingled with the parsley green.

And if poetry were always fact and tradition always true we should carry our spinning back to the time "when Adam delved and Eve span." In the Middle Ages there lived in my county a great and powerful Prince Bishop, Henry de Blois, brother of King Stephen, the builder of St. Cross, a great antiquary and collector of things rare and curious. Amongst the many things he brought to England were a remarkable series of black marble fonts carved at Tournay, in Belgium. Four of these are in Hampshire. The best known is that in Winchester Cathedral. One quite equal is at East Meon. On one side of this is portrayed Adam and Eve in the act of

leaving Paradise. Paradise itself is a substantial building in the Romanesque style and stands in the background. An angel presents Adam with a spade and teaches him to dig, and to Eve he gives a spindle and distaff and teaches her to spin, which old-world picture teaches us a lesson full of value and carries a moral, to all who will heed, that a wise solatium for sorrow and the best balm for all unrest and care is work.

How was the earliest spinning done? In a very simple way, and simple it has continued. The fibre to be spun was arranged on a rod or distaff, held under the left arm or tucked into the girdle. The spindle was from 9 to 12 inches long. A notch was cut at one end to catch the thread, and to this a portion of thread was tied. The spindle was weighted to assist its motion, and given a rotary motion by twirling it between the fingers of the right hand or by rolling it on the knee and sending it loose. The fibre to be spun was drawn out in a uniform strand between the fingers of both hands and simultaneously twisted into yarn by the rotating spindle. Here is a spindle—given me by an old Scotch lady—which is perhaps 150 or 200 years old. Its weight is a spindle whorl from the Romano-British town of Silchester. It is 1,500 years older than the spindle, but fits it well.

This exceedingly simple appliance was all that was known in Egypt and Greece in their best days, and the method remained the only one till comparatively recent times. It is still practised in Brittany, Malta, and India, and the young lady who is demonstrating for us to-day learned the art in Epirus only a few years ago. And as there is no art that continued so widely diffused and remained so long unprogressive, so on the other hand there is nothing in the whole range of mechanical industry that has developed improvements of greater variety, com-

plexity, and delicacy of action than the various machines now employed for spinning and weaving.

A slightly more improved mode of spinning was that of the one-thread wheel, which in reality was nothing more than the loose spindle mounted in a frame and driven by a belt or cord passing over a wheel. Like the hand spindle, work on this was interrupted. The spindle first must rotate at a high speed, and then the yarn spun had slowly to be wound on.

The third method of hand spinning is by far the most interesting, and was the most common. It was a great advance when men conceived the idea of giving a rotary motion to the spindle by the application of the foot, setting both hands free and making the work continuous. The first one to think of this apparently was none other than the illustrious painter Leonardo da Vinci. There is a drawing by him extant of a spinning wheel with flier and double band, and to him is given the credit of the invention of the spinning wheel known as the Saxony wheel. A copy of this drawing is in the Patent Office.

The spinning wheel spread slowly. Mary of Guise is said to have introduced it into Scotland. It does not appear to have been in use in England before 1680. But when once it came, the use of it spread with marvellous rapidity until there was scarcely a home without it.

It is the universal diffusion as well as the great antiquity of spinning that has left such a mark on our language and our ordinary phraseology. Curiously enough, the minister of religion pays the severest penalty. If the sermon is not short, we say he gave us a long yarn and wish he had cut it short. If he breaks down, we say he loses the thread of his discourse, and by the word text we mean something that is woven in. But it is in the land of poetry and painting that the spinning wheel seems most at home. Both Romney

and Gainsborough loved to paint women spinning, and one of the triumphs of art is "Lady Hamilton at the Spinning Wheel." The sitter is at such perfect ease—so unlike modern portraits—she is actually spinning, and although she spins with such skill and dexterity the thread forms over the tip of her little finger so unconsciously that she is able to turn an arch look on the spectator as if she were doing nothing.

Turning from painting to poetry, we find in this domain that spinning seems to be a portion of ideal happiness. Rogers the poet (1763-1855) framed his "Wish" and the height of his ambition as follows:—

Mine be a cot beside the hill,
A beehive's hum shall soothe mine ear,
A willowy brook that turns a mill
With many a fall shall linger near.

Around my ivied porch shall spring
Each fragrant flower that drinks the dew,
And Lucy at her wheel shall sing
In russet gown and apron blue.

The other poet I refer to is Bloomfield, who wrote the "Farmer's Boy." Though born in the country, most of his time was spent in a London garret, and there he wrote his descriptions of country life. Had he remained in the country, most probably they would never have been written. One of his poems of country life is called "Richard and Kate on Fair Day." Richard says:—

Come, Goody! Stop your humdrum wheel,
Sweep up your orts and get your hat,
Old joys once more revived I feel,
'Tis fair day, aye and more than that. . . .

She straight slipped off the wall and band,
And laid aside her locks and twitches,
And to the hutch she reached her hand,
And gave him out his Sunday breeches.

The "wall" and "band" I take to mean the two cords that drive the bobbin and flier; the "lucks" and "twitches," the pieces of flax plucked off when the flax gets too thick that feeds the thread.

The Syrian women were spinners. They spun as they walked in the open, and in the quiet home in the midst of the fair green hills that girdle quiet Nazareth that Mother spun who kept and pondered in her heart the words of her wonderful Son who worked in the carpenter's shop. And when that Son came forth to teach among the wealth of flowers scattered round His path, teaching a people whose only thought was to provide for their body's needs, His gospel to them was, "Consider the lilies of the field how they grow, they toil not neither do they spin, and yet I say unto you that Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these."

Lastly, is anything finer than that description of the virtuous woman whose price is above rubies, who like Delilah spun and wove?—"She seeketh wool and flax and worketh willingly with her hands. She is like the merchant ships. She bringeth her food from afar. She layeth her hands to the spindle and her hands hold the distaff. She maketh fine linen and selleth it and delivereth girdles to the merchant. . . ."