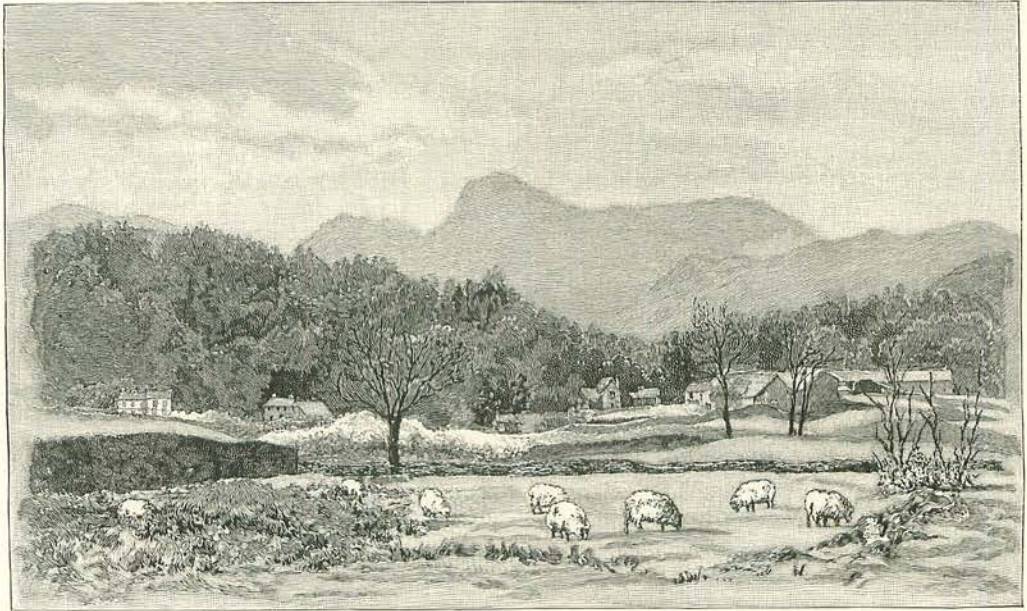


REVIVAL OF HAND SPINNING AND WEAVING IN WESTMORELAND.



ELTERWATER VILLAGE.



WHEN I first became a spinner and weaver I thought it right to learn a little about the origin and history of these arts. I found that this practically meant the study of the life and literature of nearly six thousand years. I waded through a vast quantity of exceedingly tiresome reading—through treatises, handbooks, and innumerable articles in the dictionaries of the industrial arts. To gain any practical knowledge I was expected to master a mass of figures, profound calculations as to threads, warps, and wefts, and bewildering drawings of all kinds of frightful machines. Sometimes, however, in a humble footnote the treatise writers would refer me to Homer and Catullus, and, to my great delight, I found that the poets always told me the very thing I wanted to know; generally telling it delightfully, too, which, as a rule, the treatise writers did not. If I wished to give a very precise and vivid description of the loom as I see it working to-day in my Westmoreland village, and as you may see it illustrated here, I should certainly quote that delightful passage from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*

which I will give in the words of my old copy, "made English by several hands" in 1724:

Both take their stations and the piece prepare
And order every slender thread with care;
The web enwraps the beam, the reed divides,
While through the widening space the shuttle
glides,
Which their swift hands receive, then poised
with lead
The swinging weight strikes close the inserted
thread;
Each girds her flowing garments round her waist,
And plies her feet and arms with dexterous haste.

The honorable precision of this passage can only be rightly appreciated when one stands in the weaving-room and takes the weaver and his work as a living commentary on the poet.

So far for weaving. To match this take the grand passage on spinning from Catullus, with the swing and beat of the oft-repeated line:

Trail ye a long-drawn thread, and run with destiny,
spindles.

Spinning and weaving! One associates them now with newspaper reports of strikes and the prices of calicos; with dreadful cities of death

where the sun itself seems to swoon and sicken, and through which one hurries with closed eyes and aching heart. But only a hundred years ago the words had sweeter import, and brought with them lovelier memories. Through the poetry of six thousand years, through the visions of seers and in the lives of all peoples, the shuttles gleam and fly and the distaff bears gentle sway. These arts still live for you on the tombs of Egypt, still sing to you from the lyres of Greece. The holiest of all goddesses was their guardian, the wisest of all kings gave them his blessing and his praise. So, preaching thrift, honor, and peace, they themselves grew in honor for sixty centuries till you come to the year 1773. Then all changes. "Happy inventiveness," as my treatise writers are pleased to call it, then came into play and very effectually extinguished poetry. For "the dragons with golden jaws, the virgin labor of her shuttle," you shall have cheap Manchester goods; for the sweet singing of poets under blue skies you shall have the roar of ten thousand spindles under black ones; and for the wise women who spin and the men to whom was given wisdom to do the work of a weaver you shall have gangs of factory hands, their stagnant souls rotting in their pallid bodies, wan as ghosts beside Acheron, though you have a dozen acts of Parliament to prevent you over-driving them.

Here 's the world half blind
With intellectual light, half brutalized
With civilization, having caught the plague
In silks from Tarsus, shrieking east and west
Along a thousand railroads, mad with pain
And sin too.

This is the way progress and machinery have enabled you to realize Plato's vision of "young citizens living in beautiful and healthy places, so that from everything they see and hear loveliness like a dream shall pass into their souls."

Now I have to tell the story of how we tried in a little Westmoreland dale to bring back to life Shakspeare's pretty picture of

The spinsters and the knitters in the sun
And the free maids that weave their thread with bones.

In a corner of my dining-room stands an old spinning-wheel. There it has stood for many years forgotten and useless, its bands broken, its wheel silent. On its distaff still hangs a hank of flax, dusty and discolored. Perhaps some fair Margery or Dorothy, long since with God, may have turned that wheel, singing with a light heart as she spun the thread. Everybody who came to see me said, "Dear me, there 's a spinning-wheel! How very picturesque!" Sometimes an adventurous soul would sit down and

try to turn the wheel; then it would groan and creak dismally, and my friends would give it up as hopeless. But always as they left they made some congratulatory remark about the wonderful improvements of late days and how thankful we ought to be for machinery. One day as I read my Wordsworth the book opened at the nineteenth and twentieth sonnets, in which the poet laments the disuse of the spinning-wheel in Westmoreland. In the first he enumerates the wheel's many kindly and beautiful offices: how it comforts the sorrowful, soothes the throbbing pulse, and aids and deepens love. The second touches a higher level; here he sings of the "venerable art torn from the poor." Lifting my eyes from the page my old wheel seemed to say, "Bring me back to work and usefulness; let my dry bones live."

There too, within six miles of my house, under the shade of his hills and woods, lived Mr. Ruskin, and often had my heart burned within me as I read his fiery words calling on the men and women of England to spin and weave as in the days of old. Still I paused, waiting for the living word to lift me into action. It came to me one quiet autumn day in a cottage on Loughrigg Fell. That very week I had been troubled in mind about three old friends living out on the hillsides. They were old and feeble, too blind to sew and too weak to go out for work, and "it 's but little call there is for knitting." Your true North-country woman does not ask for alms; her back is too straight for that, and her breed too good. Give her honest work and she will do it. But what work? The answer came as I sat and talked to a thorough Westmoreland dame in her house-place that quiet autumn day. You may see her portrait drawn with absolute fidelity as the center figure in the illustration of the "Three Fates" on page 523. The talk ran on to spinning. "In mother's day," said my old friend, "every woman spun, but when t' wheels died out the gude times went too; m' 'appen they 'd come back if t' wheels did." Then and there I determined that the wheels should come back. "The venerable art torn from the poor" should, God helping us, be given back to them.

Now, at the foot of the hill on which my house stands, there lives an old woman of eighty-six, of a type now, alas! nearly extinct, strong and masterful in her youth, silent and clear-headed in her old age. She is the left-hand figure in the drawing of the "Three Fates." I took my wheel to her, and she welcomed it as an old friend, for she had spun all her young days. I had it mended and put into good working order, and soon I sat down to my first lesson. Desperately disheartening work I found it; her old, rheumatic fingers made a beautiful thread, but my clumsy, modern ones



THE "THREE FATES."

produced a dreadful gouty string, all tangled lumps and knots. Everything went wrong: the wheel reversed, the thread broke, and the flax twisted itself up into inconceivable bewilderments; but when I lost patience Grannie would say in her quiet, resolute way, "Aye, but thou maun do it"; so I persevered for three days till I could and did do it. A few weeks' practice completed my education, and I felt that I could now teach others. I laid my project before Mr. Ruskin, and he wrote me word to be of good courage, that "I could not be engaged on a work of purer wisdom and benevolence." I now felt well armored against all objections, and could go forward bravely. The objectors soon came, legions of them—the hopeless creature who says, "Give me common sense," the solid friend who worships John Bright and dis-

likes sentiment, and the tiresome man who quotes books on political economy and raves about progress. The objections, too—what a sameness there was about them! It was the lumps and knots again, only in another form: it would never pay; it was not practical; people did not want linen to last a hundred years; it would be bad for trade if it did. Finally there was a large class of well-meaning friends who had been willfully content to buy rotten calico all their lives and now met me with the embarrassing question, "But why do you do it?" I marshaled my reasons and found them to be three: first, to help my old women, otherwise helpless; secondly, to assert in a humble way the principles preached in a noble way by Mr. Ruskin, that all lasting and honorable work is done by men's fingers and men's minds, and



ST. MARTIN'S FROM THE MEADOWS.

not by steam power,¹ and that hiring electricity to run your errands, or the sun to paint your portrait, or steam to weave your linen, will not give sense to your message, or soul to your face, or durability to your shirt; thirdly, that I want to have, and want others to have, an entirely honest linen that can be trusted, that I can hand down to my children after me. Practically, if I wanted it I must make it for myself. I now named my project to a few select friends, and some kind ladies at once took up the cause with enthusiasm. I drove about with my wheel and gave lessons to many a sympathizer; but, after all, the wheel was its own best advocate. Wordsworth had not exaggerated its strange qualities and powers. It soothed and calmed the throbbing pulse, and the work was found to be very fascinating. Then came the first practical question, where to get wheels. I advertised, wrote to all kinds of people, and scoured the countryside. Now and then a daleswoman would drop in to report that she had heard tell of a wheel in some remote valley. Then off we started, keen as hounds when the scent lies well, but very seldom succeeded in running the prize to earth. Generally the wheels had long since been "broken down," or, if existing, were too fragile and shattered to be of any use. We labored on, but after all my efforts I could only secure seven wheels, all more or less weak. So at last the village carpenter was interviewed, and after due consideration he undertook for fifty shil-

lings a wheel to make me fifteen wheels exactly similar to the best of my old wheels, which I gave him as a model. The next two months was a period of great anxiety; many an hour did I spend in the village workshop. Difficulties beset us on every side; patterns of the iron work were sent to two of the largest Birmingham firms, but Birmingham sent back word that she did not know the use of such things and would not and could not make them. Then questions occurred as to the balance of the wheels, the adjustment of the bearings, and other knotty points. Luckily our carpenter was a man of infinite resource, and at last our first wheel was completed, and, to our great delight, it worked well. We next formed classes for the women, and a kind friend undertook the pleasant but arduous labor of instruction.

I remember seeing a print somewhere of a spinning-class in the old days—all the girls sat with their wheels round the mistress, who presided in the midst with a long wand in her hand. The wand was freely applied to the shoulders of any neglectful pupil. Even with this advantage three years' apprenticeship was required before a girl was considered a good spinster. We had to take our pupils in hand when they were old and weary, and could only give three weeks' practice instead of three years.

To carry our system out successfully it became necessary to take a cottage where ultimately the loom was to be established and all

¹ I am glad to find that the pure hand-work is not only more durable but far finer than anything yet achieved by mechanism. The finest Indian muslin—the "Woven Air" of Dacca—has 100 threads of warp and 110 threads of weft to the inch, the thread being

spun on the distaff only and hand-woven; but even this is coarse beside the wonderful linen of Egypt, which has 270 double threads in the warp and 110 in the weft to the inch. What a tribute this to the delicacy of finger and limitless patience of old Egypt!

the business of the new industry carried on. I bore in mind Horace's pretty injunction, "Near the house let there be a spring of running water and a little wood close by." Good fortune favored me, for such a place was discovered, and, by the happiest chance, was then to let. It stands in Elterwater, close under the shadow of Langdale Pikes. On its front is blazoned the date 1692. It fulfilled all my wants. There rising at the back was the Horatian wood, all bright, when I first saw it, with daffodils and the earliest primroses. Elterwater Tarn lies in front, shining low in the sweet morning light, and there too was "the spring of running water" dancing and foaming under Elterwater bridge. Here the cold green waters that rush down Brownie Ghyll and Crinkle Ghyll unite with a hundred other mountain streams and roll down the Langdale valley, broadening till they reach the sea. The two little landscapes show the stream, wood, and hills, and on the extreme left-hand corner of the one with the broken water the spinning-house gleams white against the encircling wood. All my poetic friends looked at the date on the walls and the daffodils in the wood and said it was quite ideal; all my practical friends measured the rooms, tested the floors, looked to the drains, and pronounced it very suitable. By generous grace, too, there was a little lawn where we could do our bleaching, and an outside room, just the very thing for the loom; so with a glad and grateful heart I took possession.

Our work was old-fashioned, and I was old-fashioned enough to wish to dedicate the little spinning-home to some saint. As our art had a history of six thousand years, there were whole hierarchies of gods, saints, and heroes to choose from; but still I was much exercised on this question of saintship. I must have a saint as opposite as possible to the apostles of modern progress and the shoddy saints that Manchester and Bradford honor with statues. A wise friend, who keeps her mind nicely poised between sentiment and work-a-day common sense, nominated St. Martin, and referred me to the first part of Mr. Ruskin's "Our fathers have told us." Here indeed was a vivid sketch of a most delectable saint—one who did his Master's work quietly and effectually without fuss or worry; a pure and wise person, discreetly jovial, yet a disciplinarian, and not given to fantasies. Above all, the grand typical act of St. Martin was to clothe the naked; and were not our arts in all truth gracious ministers to cover, clothe, and warm, answering the wants that begin with the cradle and end with the grave? So our home was duly dedicated to St. Martin; and let us hope that we work under his

benediction, the rent cloak for a badge, and the strong, wise life for an example, waiting till some good wood-carving friend sends us his effigy to place in our porch. One by one the women learned the new art which is indeed so old. When any woman could produce a good thread I let her take her wheel home, and supplied her with flax, buying back her thread, when spun, at the rate of two shillings a pound. Two of my best spinsters once spun a whole pound of thread in one day; but that was a *tour de force* not readily to be repeated, and only undertaken because there is a tradition that in the old days a good spinster could spin a pound of flax in a day, and they were determined to convince me that women could do now what they could do then.

And now before me rose the vast difficulty of weaving. It had been a dream of mine to carry through the whole business from the flax in the field to the sheet on the bed; but this I found impossible. I was obliged to get my flax from Ireland. I was warned too that the weaving business would be well-nigh impossible to an amateur. Experienced friends wrote and said, "Whatever you do, don't try to weave, and don't bleach." I at once determined to do both.

Carlyle says that the only way to conquer doubt and misgiving is to do the duty lying next to your hand. So I shut up my books and treatises, ignored my friends' warning letters, and set to work to get a linen-loom. Such a thing seemed as extinct as the dodo, but at last I was introduced to an old-established firm in Kendal, which took root back in the last century, but had blossomed out of late into big factories and steam-power. After consideration they thought that there was an old loom long since dead and now buried in one of the cellars; possibly its dead bones might live again; at any rate I could try it. After a search it was discovered. Very ghostly and gloomy it

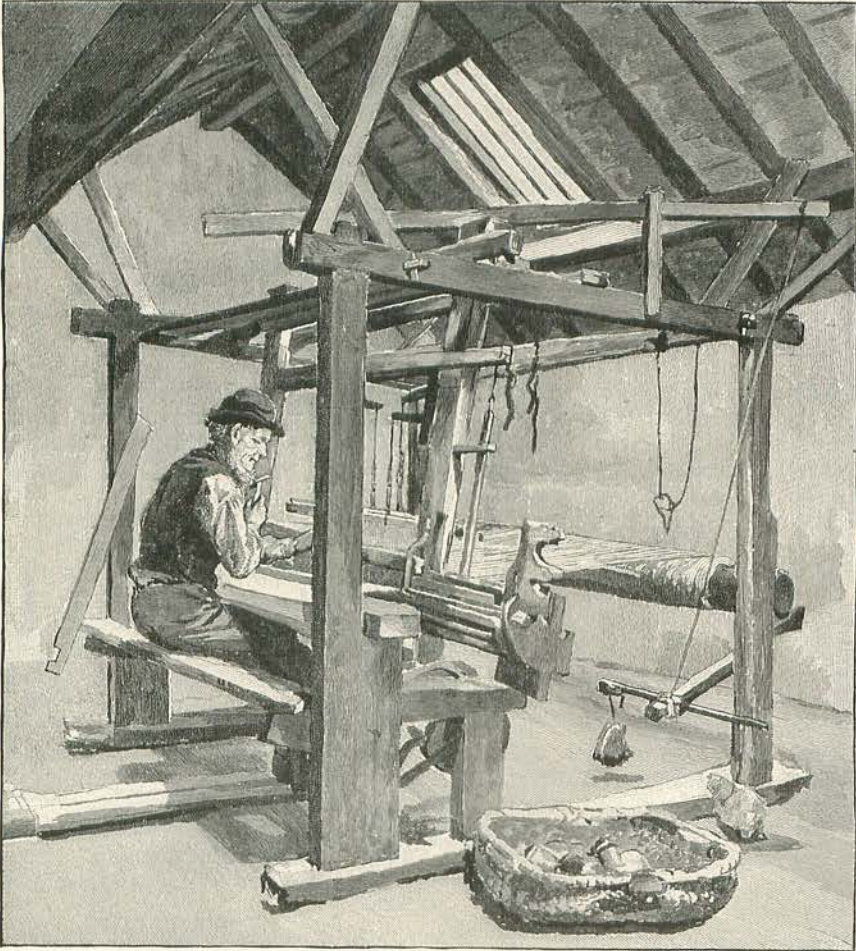


WINDING THE SPOOLS.

looked; dust, rust, and the worm had preyed upon it, but still it seemed to have what the scientific men call the "potentiality of life" in it. The poor fragmentary thing was carted over to Elterwater and arrived one wild night. It was welcomed with much delight and not a little bewilderment. I was in Lon-

Campanile. This was brought; and so, guided by this precious example, much light was thrown on its proper adjustment, and it was at last duly erected.

The next thing was to secure a weaver. We found one in a dim back yard in Kendal. Many years ago he had woven linen and was



A LOOM AT ST. MARTIN'S.

don then, but the records of St. Martin's state that next morning a solemn council was held over it, consisting of a lady who had been the heart and soul of the movement from the first, the clergyman of the parish, who had a pretty talent for engineering, and the aforesaid village carpenter. As none of them had ever seen a loom before, or had the vaguest idea of the functions of its various parts, then lying in a confused heap at their feet, much bewilderment ensued, and the problem of putting it together was not solved till suddenly the ingenious lady bethought herself of a certain photograph of Giotto's "Weaving," from the

willing to try again. The illustration shows both loom and weaver. The form of the loom has been practically unchanged for six hundred years, and may be traced back pictorially through English Hogarth to Florentine Giotto. I had next to get a warping mill and winder, and innumerable tools and appliances. By degrees we got initiated into the mysteries of warp and weft, into beaming, warping, and sizing, and soon "heddles," "reeds," and "picks" became household words with us. On Easter Monday, 1884, the actual weaving began, and that day saw the first hand-spun and hand-woven linen produced in England in this gen-

eration. The dull thud of the loom was music to my ears, and standing by the weaver's side, watching his shuttle fly, I seemed to join hands once more with the memorable past. They say that a drowning man sees in one flash all the past events of his life; so in the dusty weaving-room I saw strange, swift visions of centuries long since gathered and gone by. It was a happy day when the first thirty yards were completed. Frankly, the work was wretched—as coarse as canvas, dreadful to touch, and horrible to smell. But two pleasant surprises were in store for me. A lady skilled in art needlework saw the linen and was enraptured with its color and texture. Here, she said, was the wonderful neutral tint, made up of blended grays, yellows, and browns, that was such a precious background for her art. I tested this and found it true. I placed on my drab-colored linen a gorgeous crimson tulip, and it glowed into still brighter flame of color; then a spray of stephanotis and a cluster of bronze leaves, and that dull stuff lifted the one into brightened purity and the other into ruddier strength. My second pleasant surprise was to see the transformation made by those potent magicians, soap and water. I took thirteen yards of this harsh stuff, made it into sheets, boiled, mangled, and bleached it on the grass, and in a little time it became soft, white, and fragrant. Sometimes we have a great washing-day, all after the old-fashioned method, with no chemicals to aid our bleaching except such as are made in heaven's laboratory. We keep as close to our Homer as we can, taking for example his familiar lines:

They took the clothes in their hands and poured on the clean water and trod them in trenches thoroughly, trying who could do it best. And when they had washed them and got off the dirt they spread them out on the sea beach where the sun had blanched the shingle cleanest.

Now to sum up. First of all, to answer the question, Does it pay? which is the average Englishman's first question. I want my

project to be, as all honest schemes ought to be, self-supporting; so I am glad to be able to reply that it does pay, even in the hard and fast commercial sense. I had been mindful of a maxim of Mr. Howells, in one of his books, "Before you learn to do a thing, pray be sure people want it." I find people do want the Langdale linen, for without advertising or publicity I have orders from all parts of England for many hundreds of yards. And it pays too in a coin, current in another kingdom than this; pays a hundred-fold in the glad, uncounted treasure of brightened homes and hearths made happy with sweet and honest labor. I reap, too, all to myself, a little harvest of pleasant sights and sounds. It gladdens me greatly to pass a cottage door and to hear from within the soft murmur of the wheel. Once too, on a wild November day, I saw a strange weird vision of the Fates, not Narcissus-crowned, but here alive before me as three Westmoreland women. Little did the three spinsters think as they drew and cut the tangled thread from the distaff that they were setting forth in homely fashion under the crags of Loughrigg the tremendous myth of life and death preached centuries ago under the olive groves of Greece.

My tale is told. In fear and trembling I have sown my little heritage in earth's wild fields, and I wait in patience for the harvesting. Last night I looked from my windows over three Westmoreland dales sleeping quietly beneath the white stars. I was glad to think that in those three valleys we had been able to add the sweet murmur of the wheels by the fireside to the cry of the sheep on the hill and the song of the birds by the mere. I know that the world counts such gladness as the foolishness of an idle dream; it passes us by, but leaves us in peace, honestly striving to dedicate once more to England's men and women the storied inheritance of her holy dead, that here in this quiet corner of the world her humble sons and daughters may once more eat the labor of their hands in honor, usefulness, and peace.

Albert Fleming.

