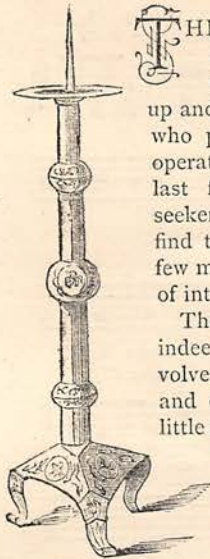


## THE STORY OF FURNITURE.



A CANDLESTICK OF THE TENTH CENTURY.

THE famous golden table of priceless value which is somewhere hidden underground, and is only to be dug up and brought to the surface by persons who preserve strict silence during the operation, has sunk so deep since the last failure as to baffle all treasure-seekers. But although we shall never find that legendary *chef-d'œuvre*, yet a few moments' reflection will reveal much of interest in more accessible furniture.

The whole cycle of human life—and indeed the entire history of man—revolves around those commonplace tables and chairs which we daily use with so little thought. The philosophers who occupied so much time in endeavouring to find a definition of man, might have called him the furniture-making animal, for no other creature has arrived at that degree of intelligence. He has even provided his gods with furniture and

exalted it to the sky: Jupiter sits in the clouds, and from one leg of his chair depends a long golden chain, at the end of which the earth hangs in space; while the constellation known as Cassiopeia, or the Lady in the Chair, nightly shines about the Pole. Something of a sacred character has ever clung to the table—the ancients kissed it in any sudden alarm as if it were an altar, and even now grace is said over it, though of course with no reference to the wood, and in a very different spirit. In their origin the table and the altar are so closely conjoined that it is difficult to separate them. Offerings, as of fruit, were placed on tables before the idols; and even to the Hebrew temple a table was admitted. Some of the customs and laws which grew up about this piece of furniture may be traced in the legal language of the present day—for instance, a person is pronounced divorced from table (*mensa*), &c. Perhaps the first chair was a stone. It often happens that what in later times is looked upon with a species of veneration, was in the first place an article of common use, since supplanted by improvements. The rude block casually used as a seat in primitive days, became afterwards consecrated as the throne upon which traditional usage rendered it essential that kings should be crowned. The well-known stone under the coronation chair at Westminster may be adduced as an instance of this. A large stone is still preserved at Kingston-on-Thames with peculiar care, as

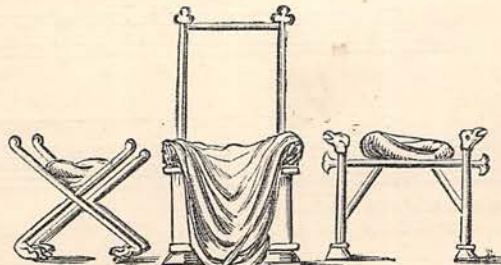
the throne on which seven Saxon kings were crowned. The council of the Areopagus at Athens sat on seats hewn out of the solid rock; and in our own country there still remain the rock-chairs of Cornwall.

The stump of a tree would suggest the use of a block of wood as a stool. In the rural districts the stump of an elm, the upper sawn surface of which affords a very tolerable seat, is often placed outside the roadside inn, and the carters drink their ale there. Within sometimes there still survives a form of furniture once in use even in the houses of the great—the settle, which is in fact a long bench with a tall back and arms. A settle was part of the parlour furniture of a knight's house in Henry VIII.'s time. There too may be found the trestle-table, whose legs or supports resemble the letter X, in its primitive shape, and almost exactly reproducing the tables at which the Norman conquerors of England sat, upon the forms which we now see only in schools. Suppose the tree-stump, or block of wood, elevated on three or four smaller pieces, and the idea of the stool is arrived at: and when some early genius chipped these into shape, and fixed them into the block, the stool was complete.

The period preceding the Norman Conquest was the age of stools. In the Anglo-Saxon house they were the chief articles of furniture, and that unimaginative people, who scarcely seem to have possessed any creative faculty, exhausted their ingenuity in ornamenting and varying the forms of their stools. Some were panelled at the sides. Sometimes the seat was triangular, and a single post rose up—the germ of a back, and a most uncomfortable one. Others had two upright posts and a cross-piece—still nearer the chair. The trestle was also utilised as it still is in camp-stools. A bishop sat on a stool with the head of a wolf carved on each side, and the paws on the feet—wolves, it must be remembered, were plentiful in England at that date. The character of a people is reflected in its furniture: thus the savages of the Pacific, though totally destitute of civilisation in one sense, yet exhibit their artistic

taste in exquisitely carved paddles, canoes, and implements. The furniture and implements of the Anglo-Saxons show them in precisely the opposite light. Their favourite weapon was the heavy, crushing battle-axe; at Hastings they are described running with it "hanging from their necks"—*i.e.*, over the shoulder.

They drank their ale from buckets—great cups of small oaken staves put together, and hooped like a bucket. Their candles were stuck on spikes instead of fitting into a socket. They sat on hard, cumbrous, angular stools, only



ANCIENT CHAIRS.

fit for men in armour who could not feel: and the whole furniture of their houses indicates a race living almost entirely in the open air, and indifferent to comfort. Yet when they overran the country they must have found much of the Romano-British civilisation remaining; but they do not seem to have copied or adopted any of the elegant conveniences of the Roman villa. Perhaps in the thrones of about this period, which were merely carved blocks of wood, some faint resemblance may be traced to a Roman altar, or to the mouldings around the base of a column.

With the Normans there began an era of art. The term "Norman" is here used to express the three or four centuries succeeding to the landing of William the Conqueror—all that period of English history during which the high offices of State and Church were exclusively filled with men of pure Norman blood. That period saw the arts of architecture and of furniture-carving (usually a reflection of the first) carried to their greatest perfection. Not a stone of the churches remained unchiselled; the very hedges furnished them with designs in the maple-leaf; not an inch of their furniture was unsculptured. Chairs of the abbots of that day are still preserved, and the pointed windows of the ecclesiastical buildings are easily recognised in the panels—as they are even now on the ends of pews in our churches. Some of them are shaped like a miniature church, with pinnacles and buttresses. The great round table of the Chapter House of Salisbury Cathedral, considered to be fully 600 years old, stands firm and solid on legs which are

placed under its edge at short intervals. In the castles everything of daily use, down to the handles of the knives, was curiously carved. Now upon a modern dinner-table in the grandest mansion there is a dead-level of uniformity; the knives may be of more costly materials, but they are of precisely the same shape as those used by "the commonalty," and each is exactly like the other. But in mediæval days there was an individuality about the meanest article of use: the artist scarcely made two of a similar pattern. Our method of turning out a hundred thousand Windsor chairs, or half a million carving-knives, mathematically accurate copies of one original, is totally destructive of art. We seem almost to have returned to the plainness of the Saxons, concealed by a profusion of French mirrors and gilding.

The sideboards in the time of Queen Elizabeth and James I. were magnificent pieces of furniture, though sometimes in questionable taste. The tables were

peculiar in having legs which swelled out in the middle to an enormous size, something like an inverted and greatly exaggerated soda-water bottle. After Charles I. the true English style appears to have been supplanted by lighter flimsy-looking work, clearly imported from a warmer climate. With the maypole and the morris dance the art of carving departed, and the less said of the Georgian furniture the better, in an artistic sense. It is noticeable that our ancestors of 150 years ago seem to have preferred chairs very low in the seats, and with disproportionately long, high backs.

In the huts of savages, along one side of the wall there is often a raised bank of dry earth which, covered with mats or skins, forms at once a divan or sitting-place, and a bed. Between this rude arrangement and the bed in its complete shape there are endless gradations and variations. But so early as Saxon times—to speak of our own country alone—the kings slept on bedsteads which in every important particular corresponded to our own wooden bedsteads, so fashionable before the introduction of iron and brass. There is a drawing of a Saxon bed with posts, and a roof or tester which looks much like the planked roof of a shed. It has two curtains, the ends of which are twisted about the fore-posts. Perhaps in ruder times the tester sometimes performed good service in sheltering the sleeper from the rain which penetrated the ill-made roof of the house. "A bedde of tymbre," a timber or wooden bedstead, was usually part of the furniture of a bed-room in the fifteenth century. (The ad-



BED-ROOM FURNITURE IN THE TIME OF HENRY VI.

joining illustration gives an idea of a bed-room of the time of Henry VI.) But the poorer classes were roughly lodged far later than that—sleeping on a straw pallet, with a round log of wood under their head instead of a bolster. In Henry VIII's bed-chamber at Hampton Court there was a "joyned stoole" (stools still being considered important pieces of furniture) reminding us of Shakespeare's—

"The wisest aunt, telling the saddest tale,  
Sometimes for three-legged stool mistaketh me."

The bed itself, however, in the houses of the great was of the most magnificent description long before then. Feather beds are said to have been known in Richard II.'s time. The widow of the Black Prince, 1385, describes in her will a bed of "red velvet, embroidered with ostrich feathers of silver, and heads of leopards of gold, with boughs and leaves issuing out of their mouths." A bed of much later date, James II., was of crimson velvet, ornamented with wood carvings,

and glittering with gold and silver thread; while the counterpane was of damask silk, and there were plumes of pink and white ostrich feathers on the top. The shape of the beds was generally more square than the modern fashion; the famous Bed of Ware, for instance, is ten feet nine inches long, and of equal width. The fore-posts were thicker than the others, and more richly carved. But the height of luxury is described by a poet in the reign of Edward I., who pictures a princess sleeping in a bed, while there hung aloft a golden cage, or censer, in which spices and "cloves that be swete smelling" were burning, filling the chamber with delicate odours. With the water used for washing the hands they mingled perfumes, in lieu of our modern scented soap. The English ladies of that age were noted for their fondness for bathing for beauty's sake, and are wisely cautioned not to do so in March or November. In the palace at Westminster there was a clock showing the ebb and flow of the sea.

A gentleman's house in Henry VIII.'s reign contained, amongst other things, three tables, with forms and trestles, mortised in the ground, which seems to mean fixed and immovable. There were also three "lytell chairs" for women. The parlour in another house had four "joyned stooles" and a wicker screen. The window-seats were then favourite places, and were furnished with cushions, or pillows, more or less curiously worked. Most persons have seen specimens of the tapestry with which the walls were hung, while others were merely wainscoted, or covered with thin polished wood, which sometimes came only half-way up, leaving the rest of the wall bare. The walls of churches were ornamented with paintings from the earliest times, and perhaps the practice was transferred from thence to the dwelling-houses. So long ago as 1233, the wainscoted king's chamber in the castle at Winchester—which was a favourite city with the Norman monarchs—was ordered to be painted with histories; and about the same time a similar chamber at Westminster was to be painted with green colour in imitation of a curtain. At the present day the method of papering the walls, though used in the majority of houses on account of its convenience and cheapness, stands emphatically condemned by artists and physicians alike, and a return is being gradually made to the painted wall which was the custom in Pompeii. The ceilings of old English halls are justly admired—they have been aptly compared to the hull of a ship inverted—but the floors can hardly have been equally good. They were strewn with rushes, or sprinkled over with sand, which latter, as it dried, rose in clouds and caused much annoyance. All throughout those times that are understood when the phrase "Old English" is used, there was a strange mixture of artistic taste, luxury, and barbarous discomfort. Thus, a king slept on a velvet bed, with ostrich plumes nodding over the tester, a painted wall at the head of the bed (one king gave particular directions that the bare wall

there should be painted), but when he rose in the morning there was nothing but a low stool to sit on, while his chamberlain warmed and aired his dress at the fire, which was a part of his office.

The sofa and ottoman have quite banished the settle and bench from the dwellings of polite society. The carpenter still works at his bench, and now and then benches may be found in country ale-houses. One of our most ancient poets writes of his hero or knight—

"Horne sat him a-benche,  
His harp he gan clenche."

and for many centuries that sturdy, simple piece of furniture was found in every hall. The king sat to administer justice on such a seat in Westminster Hall, where the Court of King's Bench, or Queen's Bench, still remains. The cupboard, now relegated to the rooms of less importance, was a prominent object in the old English house. The term is frequently employed now to describe a recess in the wall, fitted up with shelves and doors, but seems to have anciently meant a movable piece of furniture. In the time of Henry VIII. there was in a knight's house a small "joyned cubberde" of wainscot, and a short piece of "counter fett" carpet upon it. The king's own bed-chamber contained two cupboards. They were famous housekeepers in Queen Elizabeth's time. Napkin-presses were then in use, and, like everything else, were ornamented with carving. Our own grandmothers treasured up their oaken presses, and numbers of them are still to be found in the lumber-rooms of old houses, made of fine black oak, panelled and carved.

Of late a reaction has set in against the questionable taste which crowded our drawing-rooms with almost useless furniture, and heaps of nameless nicknacks; and a partial return to the comparatively bare apartments of ancient England is quite possible, together with chairs and tables in which something may be found besides veneer and polish. The great glass mirrors which are now seen on every mantelpiece, or suspended against the wall, were imported into England in the fifteenth century from France, though they were of much smaller size. Up till then the mirrors were of polished steel, generally oval, and very small—much like the hand-glasses still used to see the back of the head—and often enclosed in a case to preserve the face untarnished. There is a very curious illumination of about the fourteenth century, representing a knight and his lady who have alighted to rest, evidently having been riding on the same horse. The horse is fastened to a tree—a long sword hangs from the saddle. The knight (in armour) is reclining on the sward, with one knee slightly raised. He holds in his hand just such a little mirror of polished steel, resting the lower edge on his knee to keep it steady; while the lady, sitting opposite, plaits her hair by its aid. She is working it into two long plaits, in a manner almost precisely similar to the present fashion for girls; and it is noteworthy that her hair is of the same golden hue now so much admired.

