

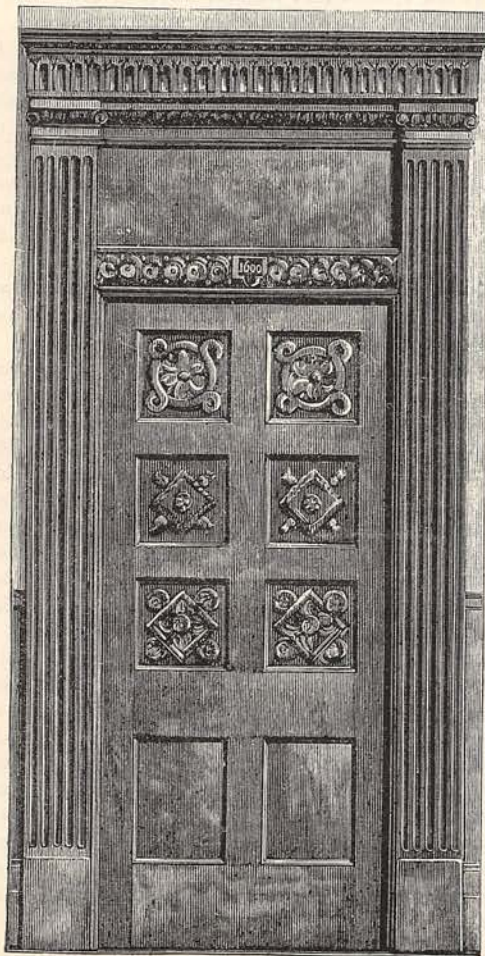
IN AN OLD OAK WORKSHOP.

“COME, now, let me introduce you to my Knight of the Chisel.”

To step from the outer air, bright with the rayless winter sun, suddenly into the sombre light of this low shop, was almost to lose one's identity. Here were no traces of ordinary work in joinery and carpentering, no piles of fragrant curly shavings, no sound of saw or hammer, but on every side, as the eye became familiar with details, were mouldings and panels, cornices and carvings, which hardly needed their rich brown tints to tell their antiquity. It would be easy to believe that we had been suddenly dropped into a seventeenth-century workshop if it were not that a neat lathe and an elaborate and costly set of moulding planes bespeak modern improvements. The Knight of the Chisel himself, a grey-headed old man, came forward to bid us welcome, and in his high stock and collar, black vest and cap, might again have provoked illusions, had he not at once entered into the conversation which we had been brought to hear. As this conversation, for the benefit of the writer, consisted

mainly of replies on one part to questions put on the other, it may be better rendered as a monologue.

Yes, there is a wonderful demand for old oak furniture, and there is no doubt that the demand is

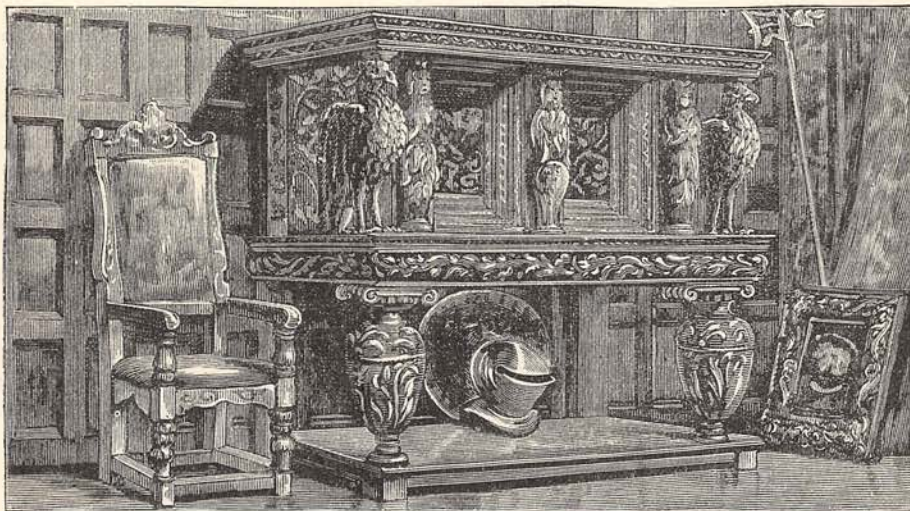


increasing and will increase rather than diminish. For myself I have had as much work for years past as kept me constantly employed; I have as much in hand now as I can conscientiously accept, and could have as much more if I would take it. Certainly my work may be considered perfectly legitimate, as much so as the restoration of a church or a picture. Many things I turn out are restored in a precisely similar way to a church, the design of the original being faithfully followed wherever practicable, or any supplementary work made subordinate to and in keeping with the purpose of the original artist. Give you a case in point? Well, here is a ceiling on which I am at present engaged for the library of a mansion at South Kensington. Into this room I have already put a door and a fireplace. Now this old cabinet, which came to me battered almost to pieces and with only two sides at all perfect, is to be enlarged and made up. This is the detail of the moulding of the cabinet, one of the most simple and effective I have ever met with. As you see, the flat moulding forms squares, with a boss at each angle, and the ceiling is to be treated exactly in the same way, with precisely the same pattern, but of course with much larger panels, and the pattern reproduced on a larger scale. The room, it is said, will then be one of the handsomest in town, although that is, I fear, saying rather too much. But I think the effect will be better than the collection of indiscriminate articles of furniture which are often—when grouped together in the same room—quite out of keeping with each other. That date over the door? Well, there is no pretence or fraud about that; it is a panel of 1600, which formed the base of the whole design.

Here now is a cabinet made for a rising artist, one of the leaders of the æsthetic movement. Yes, it is a very fair piece of work. That was worked up from one panel of original carving. Another, more elaborate,

which has in it several parts collected separately but carefully matched; and this is a tea-caddy, which has a place in the same room. This gentleman has decorated the floor of his room in a very effective manner, which can be practised by any one, and suits oak

Sometimes I have half a panel brought to me and then have to match the wood and complete the carving. It goes quite against the grain with me to plane off any carving, and I must have a lot of wood by me if possible. But as to the buying of the oak, that we were



furniture admirably. He has had some very open patterns cut in stencil-plates, and with these and a red-hot iron he makes a very pretty border all round the room. I remember seeing, some years ago, relief carving which had been turned out something after the same manner, only that a mould was used instead of stencil-plates. This was laid on some young wood and heavily pressed, until the pattern was burnt in, and then the finishing was done by hand. It was a fair imitation then of old oak, but I believe it never came to anything, or was ever generally used. Sometimes we meet in old stuff with a kind of marqueterie, light oak being inlaid in branched patterns into panels of darker wood, but that is never likely to be revived, I think. Indeed the old wood-carvers must have found it ineffective, for they seldom used it, and I don't think that in the matter of decoration and design they had very much to learn. I have a specimen here, too, of another manner of surface decoration. Here, you see, the pattern is drawn with some fluid; no, hardly ink, I think, or it would not be so bright still. That stippling, as you may call it, of the ground throws the design into very good relief, but it can scarcely be called carving. Yes, it is curious, and that is nearly all that can be said for it. I happened to admire it once in a house where I was working, and was told at once that it was of no use to anybody, and so I begged it. Ah! yes; a few years have made a very great alteration in the old oak market. One has to pay for chests now, and if a bit of carving is put up at a sale I generally have to give fair value for it, although, of course, its value to me may be higher than what most people would bid.

speaking of: just like old china, bargains in oak are things of the past. I have in the house a square cabinet, a really fine piece of work, which I also had given to me. And where do you think I lit upon it? Half buried in the garden of a labourer's cottage, and the children used to scramble about it and make a seat of it. It was crusted with dirt, as you may imagine, and it took some cleaning, but the labour expended on it was fully compensated, and I should only be too glad to be employed again after the same manner. All the country has been pretty well scoured by men seeking after old chests and linen presses, and the few muniment chests which are now and again turned out of vestries, when a church is repaired, generally fall into the hands of brokers. The best place now, I am told, to hunt for old furniture is Switzerland and Western Germany. One Fellow of a college in Oxford has his rooms filled with old oak, and a year or two ago, when he returned from the Continent, he brought back a big four-poster bedstead, carved from one end to the other. He gave £40 for it without carriage, and then it was very cheap.

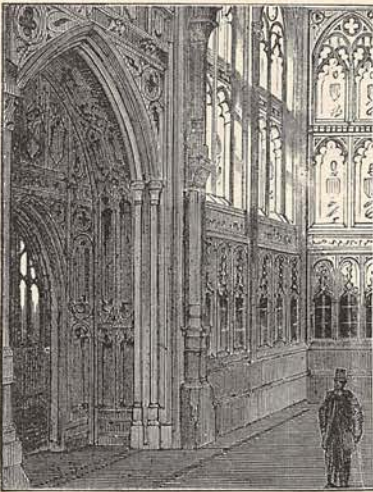
No, I seldom attempt high relief patterns, and figures or natural objects are foreign to my work, unless for pedestals or pillars. But if I have a good old fruit or flower panel, say a bit of Grinling Gibbons' work, if by rare good luck I happen to come across it, it is generally reserved for the back of a sideboard, where it has an excellent effect.

There is in wood-carving a fine field for the employment of ladies. For instance, if I had been a younger man, and inclined to extend my business, I could have given, I dare say, constant home-work to half a dozen

ladies. In this ceiling, which we were talking of just now, I require several hundred feet of flat moulding, which will be wholly turned out by my boy and myself. I am too old to begin new ways, and yet I don't care to give up so long as I can do enough to keep me from rusting. But I know that ladies are often employed in this manner. They cannot, of course, do the heavy joinery in making up the furniture, nor can they plane and prepare the work. But they carve better than men; indeed, at first they carve too well, finishing their work with a delicacy and refinement quite out of keeping with *old* work. Now if my chisel happens to slip a little I know that it does not matter, and do not fret over it. All the tools required are a small iron clamp, to hold the work steady, and a few fine chisels and gouges. Half-a-sovereign would buy them all, and practice would do the rest. In the neighbouring county town, an architect, who has devoted much time to the study of old oak, has a class of ladies to whom he is teaching carving, and I have no doubt that it will, where necessary, be a lucrative occupation—far different from the stamp swindles one so often hears of as advertised in the newspapers. And even where

necessity is not the actuating motive, wood-carving is an occupation not over-taxing strength or energy, yet demanding high artistic feeling and great discrimination. The branch I follow is not, I know, the highest phase of the art, but then while it is in the truest sense a pleasure, it is quite as truly a bread-and-butter duty. Where ladies do take it up they should first make themselves acquainted with genuine old oak. Sophistication, as people now-a-days style adulteration, has already made way to meet a coming demand, and I have been offered wood which I know to be made up for the purpose, by being steeped in bullock's blood and then covered with pin-pricks. With this difficulty overcome there need be nothing in the way of a lady making her own furniture, provided she can procure her wood. Only let her guard against the temptation to use green wood or, as in my juvenile efforts, she will only find that her carefully-devised carvings soon fall to pieces. Soft wood may be worked up and stand very well if one does not happen to let it fall; but the risk run is very great, as one slip, especially when the wood is weakened by being cut away, and the work near completion, may spoil all the labour bestowed upon it.

A STROLL THROUGH THE PARLIAMENTARY LOBBY.



COMPARATIVELY few persons know how interesting an insight into Parliamentary life may be got in what is well known at Westminster as "the Lobby." This name, simple and unpretentious, does not include the public corridors or the outer pre-

cinets, where strangers may loiter at will. It applies exclusively to the more reserved inner circle, at the main entrance to the House of Commons, which only Members of Parliament and other privileged persons may frequent. In this advantageous arena for observation, a visitor can not only, as the familiar phrase goes, rub shoulders with any of our leading politicians, but may also watch the varied incidents which enliven leisure intervals, when senators retreat from the occasional tedium of the legislative chamber.

The approaches to the Lobby are guarded by police whose duty, discharged with firmness and courtesy, is

to prevent the entrance of persons not entitled to admission. Each of these officers has a list of those who, not being members of the House, are yet authorised by the Sergeant-at-Arms, on behalf of the Speaker, to enter here without let or hindrance. They include a number of public officials, private secretaries to right hon. gentlemen, the accredited agents of leading political organisations, the City Remembrancer, and a representative of each of the press agencies, as well as of the principal newspapers. Other persons may be introduced for a short time by members, upon whom there are many calls daily for the exercise of this prerogative. Frequenters of the Lobby soon learn its habits, by which may be understood the times when this select area is seen to most advantage. Between eight and ten o'clock each evening the place looks empty and deserted, most of the members having then gone to dinner; but at certain other hours, both before and after that quiet interval, it is thronged by those whom public business or private friendship brings together at this favourite rendezvous. Opposite the entrance passage are the portals of the House of Commons, jealously guarded on either side by trusty servants of the State. No rash intruder dare cross this threshold, save only the favoured few whom members, by virtue of an order from the Speaker, may conduct to the select seats under the galleries devoted to peers and distinguished strangers. The more absolute line of reserve is drawn at the Bar, within which none may enter but the duly elected and sworn representatives of constituencies. On the left-hand side of the Lobby is the members' private