THE DISTAFF

Idyl XXVIII. of Theocritus of Syracuse,
Third Century, B. C.

The following Idyl (as the word literally signifies: a little picture of manners and customs) is here introduced as an early tribute to one of the most important of the handicrafts. The Syracusan poet, Theocritus, about to sail from his birthplace to Miletus, a city of Asia Minor, at that time famous for its wool industry, chooses an ivory distaff, as a gift for the wife of his friend, a learned and wealthy physician. Under cover of an apostrophe to the distaff, he pays a delicate compliment to his future host and hostess, in a manner wholly worthy of the accomplished court-poet that he was. But this mere grace of diction is not the quality which gives a permanent value to the Idyl. Its right of admittance to the history of textiles is generally recognized, and it is most frequently quoted, as showing the esteem in which the crafts of spinning and weaving were held, among the peoples of the Mediterranean coasts, even after the decay of the political systems which had made them great, and after luxury had seized them with its enervating and disintegrating tendencies.

O distaff practised in wool-spinning, gift of the blue-eyed Minerva, Labor at thee is fitting to wives who seek the good of their husbands! Trustfully come thou with me to the far, famous city of Neleus, Where stands the temple of Venus uprising 'mid reeds green and pliant, Thither we ask of Jove his gift of smooth seas and favoring breezes,
So that (O grateful sight!) Nicias, our friend, may greet and be greeted,
Nicias, sacred scion of the charming and lovely-voiced Graces.
So that, O distaff of ivory cunningly fashioned, I give thee Into the hands of the wife of Nicias, the skilled and the learned!
So shalt thou weave mantles for men and transparent tissues for women.
Twice in each year shall mothers of tender lands yield up their soft fleeces To be shorn for Nicias’ fair wife, famed for her beautiful ankle, Known for her industry also, and rich in all feminine virtues.
Nor would I give thee out of our land to women careless and slothful, For native art thou of Syracuse, that city planted by Corinth Deep in the marrow of Sicily, vineyard and oil-bearing island. Now well shalt thou guarded be in the house of a man wise and gentle, Skilled in medicine-making and most potent to ward off diseases; Now shalt thou dwell in Ionia, in the lovely city Miletus; So that Nicias’ fair wife, Theugenis of the beautiful ankle, May in the choice of a distaff be favored above her companions. So may she remember her friend, remember thy song-loving giver, And at thy sight, O my distaff, shall one woman say to another: Surely great grace lies in trifles and all gifts from friends are most precious!

*English version by I. S.*