THE FIRESIDE INDUSTRIES OF KENTUCKY

In the December number of "The Craftsman," under the title: "A New Irish Industry," an account was given of the successful establishment of an interesting textile handicraft among the peasants of the West Highlands, or Donegal district of Ireland. In the current issue, it is possible to offer a few words regarding a no less worthy enterprise, which is already yielding fine artistic and economic results in the Appalachian region of our own Southern States.

To visit this region is to lose a century of the inventions which are regarded as the necessities of life in the larger American cities and towns. Ships, steam-engines and even row-boats are there unknown, and the only means of travel is upon horse-back. Civilization has left these poor mountaineers far behind in all that makes for outward refinement and knowledge of the world. But they have, in their isolation, retained enviable qualities, both physical and mental. They are strong and lithe in body. They are generous and hospitable, without expectation of reward. Their household goods and their clothing are in striking contrast with the belongings which commercialism and the love of display have thrust upon the open market.

But these mountain folk are, at last, threatened with change. Already, saw-mills are supplying boards for frame school-buildings and dwellings, with which to replace the old log-houses; agents of sewing-machines are finding their way to the most obscure hamlets; and new conditions and customs are about to be established among them. It becomes a question whether the baser elements of modern life shall be passed on to them without protest, and whether honest handicrafts shall be allowed to decline and disappear among them, as they have everywhere failed, when brought
into competition with the factory-system of production.

To preserve these homely arts little effort is needed. Difficulties do not exist such as offered themselves to Morris and Ruskin, when they sought to establish home industries in the Lake district of England. In their case, it was necessary to obtain from Sweden looms, as well as weavers, to teach the native women the practice of the craft. But in our Southern States, there are hundreds of spinners and weavers who are skilled in producing the most intricate patterns. Indeed, the industry is so widespread and so important, as a means of livelihood, that young mountaineers seeking entrance to Berea College, have brought with them from their hamlets hand spun-and-woven coverlets and stuffs, in cotton, linen and woolen, asking the College to accept these in payment for their tuition. The institution recognizing from this fact, the importance of stimulating these fireside industries and of finding a market for their products, is now seeking the best means of accomplishing the desired results.

The stuffs are sold at low prices, but nothing has been cheapened in the making. They are the product of hard, honest toil. To make them is a long process demanding constant watchfulness and unremitting labor. First, flocks of black sheep must be raised. Then, the wool must be spun on large wheels for the weaving of blankets, butternut jeans for men’s clothing, and linsey-woolsey for women’s dresses.

The raw material of the linen fabrics grows in the hollow lands, in waving masses of plants, which must be cut before the bloom of the delicate blue flower. The flax is then allowed to rot, through the action of wind and rain, until the fibre is loosened from the outer husk; care being taken to seize the precise moment for this process, since, if rotted too long, the fibre is so weakened that much substance is lost in the preparation for spinning.
One of our illustrations shows the hard labor necessary to free the fibre of the flax from the chaff. The man stands at the break made of heavy oaken rails, between which he crushes the ties of flax; passing them afterward to the women who, laying the substance across boards driven into the ground, strike it with heavy, broad knives of oak; thus removing the bark which the break has crushed. In the foreground stands an oaken bench set with long iron spikes, or teeth, across which the flax is drawn. By this process the tow is removed, and the flax is left in long, soft and glossy threads which lie in twists and are now ready for the wheel.

Like the wool and the flax, the raw cotton is subjected to various hand processes, which are aided by the most primitive tools of home construction. Interesting and simple equally with the manufacture of the fabrics, are the means by which they are dyed. These mountain craftsmen are, perhaps, the only dyers remaining in our country who use the vegetable indigo and madder, and, in this use, they would be highly approved by William Morris, whose influence was directed against the employment of the aniline colors. Beside indigo and madder, the bark of the nut trees and the flowers growing on the mountain sides are utilized in the stains, with excellent results in both color and permanence. In the cabins of this industrial people, the dye-pot is found by the fireside, and the process of dyeing goes on with slow, painful effort.

The finished fabrics are interesting not merely as examples of primitive industries conducted for the purpose of supplying the real needs of a neighborhood, or section, and consequently devoid of that unmistakable commercial quality found in all manufactures created for an indefinite “market;” but they are artistically good as textures and as designs; some of them indeed being quite worthy to enter into manuals and textbooks of the arts of spinning and weaving.
Altogether these fireside industries should be fostered and developed, by reason of their three-fold good influence—economic, social and artistic—upon the mountain population of Kentucky, too well known as smugglers, brigands and maintainers of the "vendetta." It is earnestly to be hoped that the followers of Morris and Ruskin will sustain these industries and bring education to those who so earnestly desire it.
Dinner gong from the workshops of the United Crafts
Couch and magazine cabinet in green oak, with roan-skin seat cushion and pillows