FROM MERTON ABBEY TO OLD DEERFIELD

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WILLIAM MORRIS, poet, socialist, craftsman, dreamed many dreams; also, he had a magic gift for making dreams come true.

In the year 1881, when he was forty-eight years old, he bought some disused print-works on the little river Wandle in Surrey, only seven miles from London, and set up there the Merton Abbey Works. Here formerly Merton Abbey had stood; nothing remained of it then except a bit of crumbling wall. But when Morris brought his looms and frames from London and put them into the long, low buildings beside the mill pond, the spirit of the Middle Ages, the Middle Ages of the poet's imagination, settled down over this quiet enclosure among the trees.

It was to mediæval times that Morris and his associates looked for inspiration. Ruskin had pointed out the way to them, and he had not preached in vain; here at Merton Abbey was craftsmanship joined with art and workmen happy in their work. Instead of tall chimneys belching smoke, there were poplars and willows hiding the buildings from the road; instead of the rumble and roar of pitiless machines there was the sociable whir of hand-looms and the song of the birds; instead of dust and unwholesome fumes, there were fresh air, sunshine, and the odor of the flowers in the old-fashioned garden; instead of pale workmen, deadened, yet alert, each one chained to his great monster of a machine, there were ruddy-faced men and girls interested in what they were doing, and seeing the beautiful fabrics grow under their hands with a sort of personal affection.

When William Morris moved his manufactures from London to Merton Abbey, the business was already well established, and a circular sent out at the time recounted that the firm was prepared to furnish painted glass windows, arras tapestry, carpets, embroidery, tiles, furniture, printed cotton goods, paper hangings, figured woven stuffs, and furniture velvets and cloths.

Burne-Jones, Morris's dearest friend from Oxford days, painted the cartoons for the stained glass windows; but little furniture was made, and that not from Morris's designs; it was to the embroidery, the carpets, the tapestry, the figured cloths and the wall-papers that he gave most personal attention.

And personal attention meant a great deal to William Morris. "One secret of the excellence of Morris's own designs," says his biographer, "was that he never designed anything which he did not know how to produce with his own hands. He had mastered the arts of dyeing and weaving before he began to produce designs for dyed and woven stuffs to be made in his

Deerfield workers in "blue and white" embroidery

workshops." When he was reviving the use of the old vegetable dyes,—"I myself have dyed wool by the self-same process that the Mosaical dyers used," he said. His hands were constantly in the vats and discolored accordingly. "I am dyeing, I am dyeing, I am dyeing," shouted the burly, sea-faring looking man to a friend come to see him at the factory.

Color was a sort of passion with him, good, pure, permanent color. The faded blues and sage-greens of his earlier period were by no means his ideals, they were only the best he could get at the time. "If you want dirt," he raged to a customer who was talking about subdued shades, "you can find that in the street." Each new color he courted like a lover. "The setting of the blue-vat," he wrote in his essay on dyeing, "is a ticklish job, and requires, I should say, more experience than any other dyeing process."

"There was a peculiar beauty in his dyeing," says a Mrs. Holiday, one of the most skilful of his pupils in embroidery, "that no one else in modern times has ever attained to. He actually did create new colors; then, his amethysts and golds and greens were different from anything I have ever seen; he used to get a marvellous play of color into them. The amethyst had flushings of red; and his gold (one special sort), when spread out in the large rich hanks, looked like a sunset sky. When he got an unusually fine piece of color he would send it off to me or keep it for me; when he ceased to dye with his own hands I soon felt the difference. The colors themselves became perfectly level and had a monotonous, prosy look; the very lustre of the silk was less beautiful. When I complained, he said: 'Yes, they have grown too clever at it—of course, it means they don't love color, or they wouldn't do it.'"

It was just the same when he became interested in weaving. He had a loom set up in his bedroom and often began weaving as early as four o'clock in the morning. In making the designs for his Hammersmith carpets, he first made a drawing, which he carefully colored himself. One of his assistants then enlarged this design on "point paper," each point representing a single knot of the carpet. This point paper was at first laboriously made by Mr. Morris himself, but he gradually trained men to do it for him.

The history of his revival of the almost lost art of tapestry weaving is another romance of the work-shop, and not the least interesting of the sights to the visitor at Merton Abbey Works were the looms bearing these pictured splendors.

The pattern-stamping rooms showed a different process. Here his famous chintzes,—the cotton being clamped down on long tables,—were stamped with a hand-block on which the design was cut, and velvets and other fabrics were similarly treated. Elsewhere, the hand-painted wall papers were decorated.

The productions of this socialist, this friend of the poor, were expensive, and their decorations were rich and lavish, yet nobody decried more than he an accumulation of senseless superfluities. "Have nothing in your houses," he said, "that you do not know to be useful or believe to be beautiful". His taste in furniture was for solidity, straight lines, and great simplicity.

Deerfield art exhibit of 1901

An old-fashioned country kitchen he could admire; the foolish bric-a-brac of an ordinary drawing-room he despised.

Most of all he insisted, as did others of the Pre-Raphaelites, that the true root of all arts lay in the handicrafts, and that a great art could never grow up in a country whose workmen were mere machines, unhappy drudges. Meanwhile, as a step toward making craftsmen artists, as well as for the delight and the good of the doing, the artists turned craftsmen. The result was the formation of the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society, which held its first exhibition in London in the autumn of 1888. Ever since that time, there has been an increasing interest in England and here in America in societies of Arts and Crafts, so-called, for the production of household decorations of good design and of hand workmanship.

One old town especially, Deerfield in Western Massachusetts, has done most excellent service in this revival of the old arts. But Deerfield was not a frontier town in the sixteen hundreds, and old at the time of the Revolution, for nothing; nor does it neglect to draw conclusions from the reminders of this history shown in its Memorial Hall. Deerfield is no blind follower of Mediæval Italians or English Pre-Raphaelites. As Ruskin and Morris liked to talk of that wonderful Thirteenth Century, when men loved their work and took pride in it, so the Deerfield embroiderers and weavers feel themselves true descendants of the Colonial women, who, after their baking and brewing, their scouring and scrubbing, were glad to sit down in their great, clean, sunny, shining kitchens and study out some new design for a blue and white coverlet, or sew together long strips of carpet rags for which the butternut dye was already waiting.

Pleasure in their work? Of course they took pleasure in their work, the men and women of that old time. Those dry Puritans and the English High Churchman, the "idle singer of an empty day," were at one in that. They gloried in the work of their hands, those New Englanders. What jollifications they had at their "raisings," when the great timbers of their noble Colonial houses were hoisted into place. Husking bees in the autumn, quilting bees in the winter, sugaring-off in the spring: festivals of labor blossomed out all along their sober-colored year. And while recreation and labor were thus joined, labor and love, too, often went side by side. As somebody has said, it was before mother and daughter power was superseded by water and steam power. If the son were going away from home his mother and sisters, letting their grief but quicken their fingers, spun the thread and wove the cloth which was to make him a coat; the little girl worked samplers and pricked her poor little fingers sewing a fine shirt for her father, of which he and she were very proud.

Outside of the house, too, the country town had many industries in the days before the giant steam carried them all off to the cities. Deerfield now is the quietest of farming towns, but as late as the early part of the last century, it was a community of varied activity. We hear of brooms, hats, saddles, wagons and chaises, plows and cultivators, pewter buttons, bricks, gravestones, coffins, made here—and all made by hand, mind you; of cordwainers, tanners, curriers, blacksmiths,

Deerfield basket makers

wheelwrights, cabinet-makers, coopers, printers, book-binders, jewelers, watch-makers, who worked in Old Deerfield when nobody talked of art, but every man did his work well.

Then Deerfield was indeed a busy place. The boats came up the Connecticut and unloaded at Cheapside; the stage from Boston brought the latest traveller and the latest news. The old Academy, when founded in 1799, attracted young life from all the country round, and the older generation lacked not dignity and wit to keep up with the liveliest. So, with busy hands and with busy minds they lived and found life good.

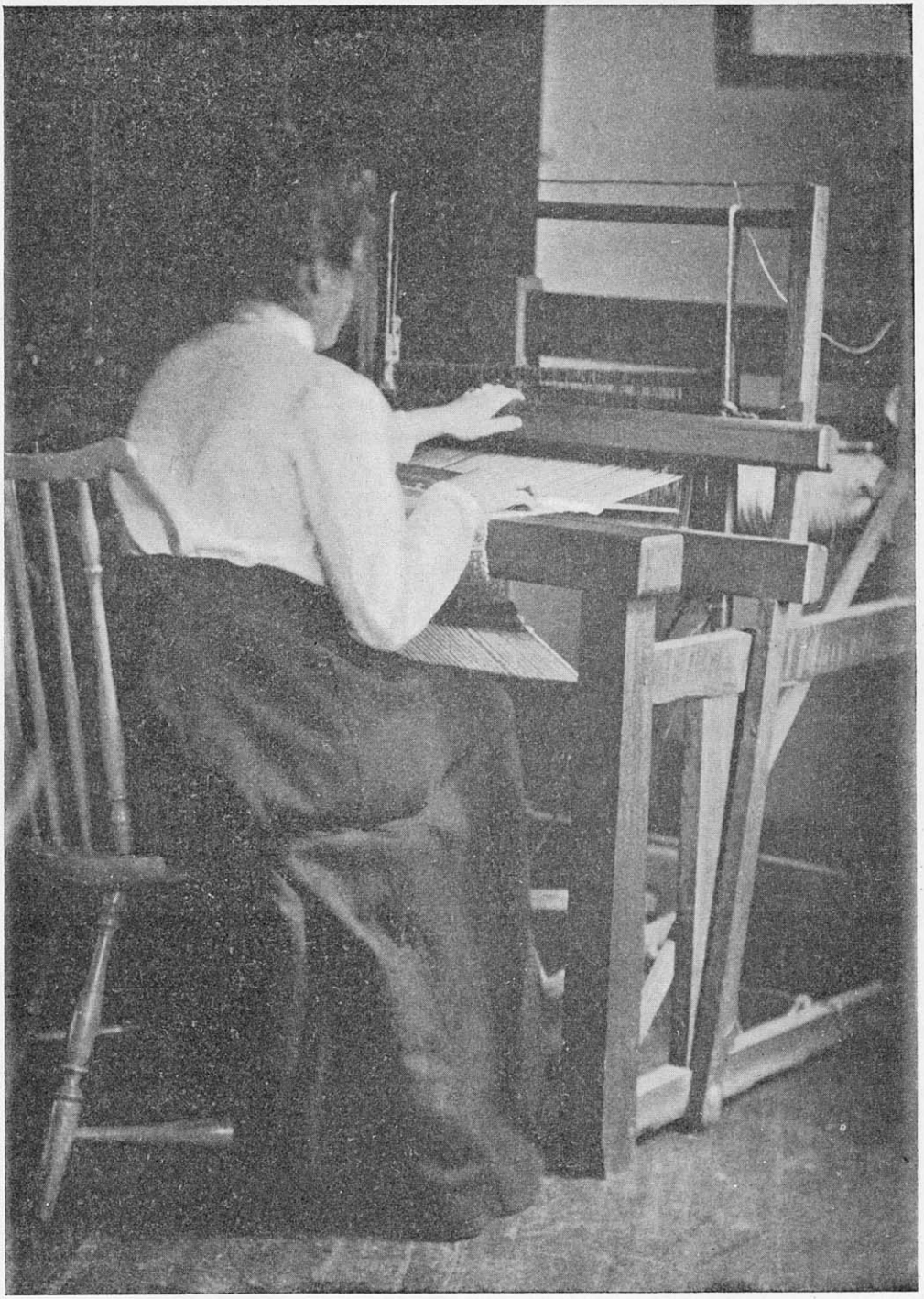
But the century which saw the great industrial revolution and the development of the Western States, made a great change in Deerfield, as it did in many another country town. Cheapside stands no longer at the head of navigation on the Connecticut. Deerfield's fat cattle are no longer famous in the Boston markets. Its prosperous farmers no longer rank as river gods. Its many old industries have departed.

The Deerfield of to-day is loved of artists and other clever folk, some of whom have bought and restored old houses standing hospitable under the elms. To this present day Deerfield, very quiet and just a little lonesome after the summer houses are closed and the summer people are gone, the new artistic crafts have been a real blessing.

It is always the little spark from outside which kindles the fire, the drifting pollen which best fertilizes the seed, and it was two adopted daughters of Deerfield, of modern artistic training, but of old New England stock, who started the Blue and White Society. Their idea found a fertile soil in which to grow.

Even before the formation of the Blue and White Society, indeed, a Deerfield lady had been for some time making rugs, for which strips of cloth were cut and woven as they were for the old rag carpet, only with greater care, and for which the colors were selected and combined with artistic taste. But the founders of the Blue and White Society, which aimed to revive the household embroideries of Colonial and later days, immediately began to employ young women of the village to execute its designs. The doilies, centre-pieces, table-covers, bed-spreads, and so forth, were, for the most part, of white linen embroidered with blue, but sometimes greater variety was allowed in the colors. With the Deerfield workers, too, as well as with their English predecessors, the methods of the old dyers are much studied, and Deerfield has furnished at least two enthusiasts in indigo, madder and fustic. An embroiderer for the Blue and White Society in its earlier days remembers how, it having been discovered that the color of the embroidery linen used in a large bedspread was not absolutely unfadable, every stitch so carefully put in was laboriously taken out. This is the spirit of the Deerfield industries.

In the old times, before the War, the girls of the Valley used to earn the money for a winter's tuition at the Academy by braiding palm-leaf hats. One of them who had never lost her fondness for the pretty old fancy-work, coming back to the town when it was in the fervor of its new work—not only were the rugs and the blue and white



A Deerfield loom

embroidery finding eager and appreciative purchasers, but Deerfield was counting as its own the marvellous, imaginative metal work done by the two friends who were of Boston and Chicago in the winter, and it had just been discovered by somebody that a Magyar hired man, a blacksmith who lived across the river, was more or less a genius in fashioning iron into beautiful forms—coming then into this vivid and eager atmosphere, she, who had been a girl in Deerfield before the War, found herself reviving the braiding of palm-leaf, only instead of hats, the new braiders made baskets and made them well in all sorts of forms. From this it was an easy step to the raffia baskets, in which some beautiful and original work has been done.

Since then there has been a class in Swedish weaving in town. But the Swedish weaving has been found to be just the old-fashioned New England weaving; so looms have been taken down from attics, and not only are rugs woven, but bedspreads, curtains, and table-covers, firm and good, are made on smaller looms, and colored, when they are colored, with natural dyes.

These are the main industries of Deerfield, though one lady makes a specialty of netting, another of embroidered card cases, not unlike the embroidered pocketbooks which they used to make there in old times, and two of the men of the town, inspired by the atmosphere of the place, have done some excellent cabinet work.

But for the most part, it is the women who carry on the new industries, and though, like those Colonial women of old, they are notable housewives, they find their new avocations most engrossing. Like the Mediæval craftsmen they have their guilds. Not only is there the Blue and White Society, but the rug makers have a society, and the basket makers have two associations: one for the workers in raffia and one for those in palm-leaf. Each of these societies carries on its dealings with the public according to its own rules.

As to the work, it is done at home in the pleasant old houses of the elm-shaded street, or in the adjoining villages. Every summer an exhibition is held, but winter and summer the Deerfield women seem always to be behind their orders. From California and Florida, from New York and Seattle, the orders come and keep coming: an evidence that, even in practical America, there is a very real and steady demand for good hand work.

Deerfield's crafts seem small and unimportant when compared with Morris's rich productions; yet Deerfield is sending all over the country beautiful things, each one breathing that indefinable odor of personality which makes Oriental wares so charming, and so is helping to bring back something of lost poetry to the earth.