A CARPENTER WHO IS A COLLECTOR OF ART OBJECTS: BY GRACE WHITWORTH

VERY busy man in New York who earns his daily bread as a carpenter is Mr. Edward Roberts; but unlike most busy men who are carpenters, he is not contented with merely earning his daily bread. He finds that his interest in life demands a great many other good things besides. In his apartment on the third floor of an old house in a once aristocratic portion of New York he has managed to add to the simple suggestion of bread as a daily portion, paintings of unusual value, hundreds of choice books and rare ceramics. His furniture is equally valuable and beautiful, made by himself from good bits of wood that have cost but a few cents, or a dollar or so. In fact, all this interesting and unusual collection which goes to make up the environment of a carpenter’s daily life, Mr. Roberts has achieved for himself by the use of his carpenter’s tools, either by additional work for which he was paid or by the exchange of labor for some particular book or picture which he desired to own.

It is rather a romantic story—the way in which he has found most of his choice pictures and books. It has not been by chance, but by keeping an alert mind and a keen interest always with him. The walls of the two larger rooms of his apartment are hung with more or less, and usually more, important old paintings. One dates back to sixteen hundred and eighty-one, by William Van Bemmel, a not unknown Dutchman. “I found it,” Mr. Roberts told the writer, “in an old junk shop in Center Street. It was grimy and cobwebby, and was given to me gladly for a few dollars.” A canvas of the sixteenth century is the work of Palma Il Giovine. It came to the United States with a collection which had been purchased on the other side. Not long ago Mr. Roberts found it in a neglected corner of an old shop. He did some additional carpenter work of a Sunday and an evening, secured seven dollars and a half and bought the picture. An interesting Belgian fruit painting is signed Pieter Jacob Horemans and is dated seventeen hundred and seventy-four. This was secured by a fair exchange of carpenter work. A still later acquisition from a Third Avenue shop is a Magdalen by I. B. W. Maes. Mr. Roberts also possesses a clever little sketch by J. Wells Champney; price, one dollar and a half. A fruit study of real interest is signed Daubigny, a cattle painting is by W. Hepburn, a landscape by F. E. Church, and several engravings by Henry Wolf.
The living room in the apartment of Mr. Roberts, showing his valuable collection of books in the home-made bookcases.
From a Photograph by Peter A. Juley.

Mr. Roberts has secured many of his most important paintings and keramics in exchange for carpenter work.
An interesting example of how he turns his brain as well as his labor to account is given in the story of a mosaic lamp globe. One day, when business took him to a marble establishment where these globes are made, he noticed that the firm was using eight or nine men to move one heavy statue. After a little thought he suggested to the manager a device that would move the statuary with one-half the labor. The plan worked, and when asked what recompense he desired, he said, “One of your inlaid globes.”

There are many pieces of interesting furniture in this apartment. The table in the center of the parlor is of alligator mahogany—the wood having been bought in the rough for three dollars. A large chair at the right of the table was made from a worn-out office sofa. The sofa was purchased for seven dollars and the chair is valued at sixty.

The bookcases, the china cabinets, the wardrobes, are of mahogany—all made by their owner. Fine mirrors hang on nearly every wall and form the doors of the large wardrobes. An unattractive fireplace has been ingeniously hidden from view by building in front of it two mahogany closets. Piece by piece, the wood and the mirrors have been obtained from old houses that are ever being torn down in New York. Beautiful woods have in this way been secured for very little. Mr. Roberts once purchased for two dollars an elevator that had been taken from an old building and stored away. It was finished with fine rosewood and mahogany, from which he has made many a handsome bit of furniture.

In the dining room are five large cabinets filled with a valuable collection of china and glassware, and dozens of odd vases and jars. There is a Chinese vase of the seventeenth century which was thought to be an imitation when purchased several years ago, but recently experts have declared it genuine and worth several hundreds of dollars. Another old vase is Japanese, made in sixteen hundred and twenty; it was broken when its present owner found it in an antique furniture shop. He secured it for seven dollars, and took it to a friend who mended it in exchange for a painting. Today, a collector lacking a vase of that particular period would have to pay at least a thousand dollars to become the possessor of the one owned by Mr. Roberts.

Contrasted with this ancient Japanese vase is a modern Japanese rose jar that is worth no mean figure. Another very beautiful vase is Minton, of exquisite yellow with royal blue border. This was
picked up at a pawn shop for very little. Among hundreds of pieces of porcelain there are twenty-two Crown Derby plates—a collection, doubtless, that no other working man in the world possesses. These were secured from a collector of books and various works of art in exchange for carved mahogany bookcases and cabinets, which were made evenings and Sundays. Art in payment for his handiwork delights Mr. Roberts more than money gain.

The most surprising collection of all in this wonderful home is the library, which contains a thousand volumes, including many first editions, in complete sets, of a number of world-famed authors. It took two years to become the possessor of twenty-six volumes of Robert Louis Stevenson’s books—for they were secured one at a time. Two beautiful vellum-bound volumes of “The Life of Marie Antoinette,” by Maxine de la Rocheterie, are from an edition that was limited to one hundred and sixty copies at twenty-five dollars each. They were not, however, beyond Mr. Roberts’ means; the bookseller needed to have some shelving done and twenty hours’ work on two Sundays was offered in exchange for the books.

There is a fine copy of “The Scarlet Letter” from a special edition of two hundred copies; a first edition of Mark Twain’s “Tramps Abroad,” which was picked up for twenty-five cents and then rebound; a handsome thirty-six-dollar volume of Bulwer’s works, printed on Japan paper, bound in morocco, and illustrated with etchings in color by W. H. W. Bicknell; a volume of Shakespeare’s comedies illustrated by Edwin A. Abbey; a first edition of Albert Smith’s “Christopher Tadpole,” illustrated by Leech; a copy of the Koran (eighteen hundred and twenty-five) in two volumes, and a “History of the Roman Republic,” by Adam Ferguson, published in eighteen hundred and twenty-five and containing a fine engraving of Ferguson made by Mr. Page from a painting by Sir Joshua Reynolds. A very large volume of Tennyson’s “Idylls of the King” is illustrated with thirty-one photogravures from excellent original designs by Alfred Kappes. The book was published in eighteen hundred and eighty-eight and was originally sold by subscription for one hundred dollars a copy. Not long ago Mr. Roberts secured his copy for two dollars.

There are many other volumes varying in subject and authorship: A volume of John Gay’s poems published in seventeen hundred and sixty-seven; an entire set of Charles Reade’s works; “Roman Nights, or the Tomb of the Scipios,” by Alessandro Verri, published in eighteen hundred and twenty-six; a set of Washington Irving’s
books handsomely bound; "Three Rolling Stones in Japan," by Gilbert Watson; "Napoleon, the Last Phase," by Lord Rosebery; the "History of War with Russia," by Henry Tyrrell, illustrated with a series of steel engravings and many fine maps; "The Marchioness of Brinvilliers," by Albert Smith; "Memoirs of George Elers," edited from original manuscript by Lord Monson and G. L. Grower.

The bookcases containing this interesting library have been especially designed by their owner. They are of mahogany and so made that not a half inch of any book is hidden from view. Each wide case has but one door and the shelves are of glass. They were thus arranged that there might be no lines of wood within the frame of the door. Nothing is seen but books. But these books have not been collected merely to be exhibited to their best advantage. Mr. Roberts has read them many times, and delights to talk of their contents. He has been collecting them one or two at a time for years.

"I have always been interested in books," he said. When asked his favorite authors, he replied: "Dickens, Walter Scott, Thackeray, Reade, Dumas—oh, all of the best English and French writers. I have read, too, much of Confucius and like the Polish, Austrian and Russian writers. I am very fond of poetry and at one time I think I knew five hundred poems by heart. I have always made an effort to read part of an hour at least, every day. Reading has always been a pleasure to me, and after a hard day's work it rests me." And this from a man who has had but two years of schooling in his life and who has earned his own living at the bench since the age of ten!

Mrs. Roberts is of Scotch origin; a school teacher in Canada before her marriage, she has since applied her thought to the science of housekeeping. She has succeeded in mastering the problem, for her understanding of it has preserved in the best possible way the treasures which her husband has worked so hard to obtain. Mr. Roberts' appreciation of her is often expressed in these words: "I could not have accomplished what I have had I not had such a wife." Although she attends to all of the housework, her appearance from early morning is always pleasant to behold. In addition to her household cares, she makes all her own clothing.

The son—a bright, manly boy of nineteen—is to enter Columbia University next fall. While preparing for college he has also been studying music; even this advantage has not been beyond the family income. The beauty of this home is not confined to its combination of art, music and literature. Its greater interest is in the perfect bond which exists between father, mother and son.