THE TALE OF THE WINDSOR CHAIR: BY JAMES THOMSON

This tale, like many another based on tradition, has been variously reported, but the following version will doubtless serve as well as another.

Once upon a time, a King of England while hunting became somehow separated from his train. To make matters worse, a storm arose. In this exigency the only available shelter from the elements was a rude hut belonging evidently to a shepherd, woodsman, swineherd or some one of like humble occupation, and the royal huntsman could not well do other than take refuge in the lowly abode. As the hut was scantily furnished, and boasted but a single chair which the rustic in his hours of ease had managed in a rude way to fashion, the King sat in that—and what is more remarkable, found it most conducive to comfortable feeling. Like many another article of domestic importance evolved in primitive conditions by the pressure of need, the seat most admirably fulfilled its function. So comfortable in fact was it, so restful to a weary body, that the monarch was quite loth to leave it. As its admirable qualities could be best conserved by having a duplicate made, he gave orders that this should be done. From this circumstance we are asked to believe that this type of chair has descended the centuries to us under the Windsor designation—under royal "hall mark" as it were.

This will do well enough for a story, but is quite unlikely to be true for the very good reason that if the King had thus favored an article of furniture we may be very sure fashion would have promptly marked it for its own, even if it were ugly—which this chair was not. For the King in those days set the style as he is apt to do to a less extent at the present time, and had the monarch in question thus fallen in love with the chair of a rustic, the seal of kingly approval would have been upon it for many a century afterward.

What, however, are the facts? If the Windsor chair is today
found in patrician homes it is only in the quarters devoted to the servants. The same is true in palace, hall, castle keep and manor. Throughout the British Isles this type of chair is found in taverns and public houses, and among plain people in town or country, being a favorite with farmer folk and the yeoman class. It has been so in America also. Always, until comparatively few years ago, the chair has been made in inexpensive woods to suit the pockets of people of moderate means.

Reverting to the story of the King and shepherd—in the novel of “Ivanhoe” Sir Walter makes King Richard of England spend the night incognito in the humble abode of Friar Tuck. Numberless, too, are the tales told of James the Fifth of Scotland—how as jolly beggar, wandering fiddler, or the Goodman of Ballengeigh, he went about among his people—usually the simple peasants—much to his pleasure and amusement, no doubt. “The King may come the cadger’s way” is a well worn saying in Scotland. Tales of Kyng and Hermite, the King and the Tanner of Tamworth, the King and the Miller of Mansfield, have a likeness to our story of the King and the peasant of Windsor. They doubtless have had a common origin.

When a simple peasant undertook to turn out an article of domestic utility such as a chair, the simplest and most direct means naturally appealed to him. When he wanted an easy chair he took note of his own impressions in the haymow and tried to fashion the seat to conform therewith. He scooped out the plank-seat of pine to conform with his own anatomy, the evidence of which we have with us today in the Windsor type of chair. In like manner, not many centuries ago, in baronial hall a board on trestles served for a dining table. The need arose for a place upon which to set dishes temporarily when diners were at meals, and behold the “sideboard” was introduced, being at first no more than a simple board set against the wall.
and supported like the main table by trestles. Among the plain people, until chairs of the Windsor type were introduced, seats were most uncomfortable, straight in the back and without stuffing. When comfort was wanted for the old or ailing, resort was had to a "wool-sack" or cushion.

The Windsor chair, as it has come down to us, is doubtless a product of evolution at no one time being perfected, nor by any single individual. I can imagine the plain plank-seat in the first instance being whittled gradually away by clever individuals in order to make it easier for the thighs. By and by the center of the seat was scooped out by some maker more enterprising than the rest, the idea being suggested to him doubtless by the impression left by the sitter in a yielding material. At any rate, in some old chairs the scooping out of the seat admirably conforms with the human form. In one instance a chair came my way having a seat two and a half inches thick. At the deepest part the sinkage was two inches. In what lies the secret of the comfort-imparting qualities of such chairs? In the dipping down of the seat at the back, in the saucer shape thereof, the position of the arms, and the inclination of the back. One's weight inclines one backward; hence the whole body is rested.

No chair can be easy save as the seat is lower at the back. When the seat of a lounging, reading or sewing chair is parallel with the floor, the maximum of comfort is impossible. These old chairmakers seemed to grasp this fact, and when they turned out armchairs intended to be used in hours of ease, they paid attention to this principle.

In the reading rooms of the Public Library of the City of Boston the chairs are fashioned after the manner of Figure 3. The eminent architects of that magnificent edifice evidently could not design a chair to better serve their purpose. I recognize the wisdom of their choice both as regards the model and the ebonized oak in which the library chairs are made. One little improvement has been ventured. The curvilinear back railing has the flat surface of the front molded. The arm terminals have also been appropriately molded and scrolled.

In Figure 4 is depicted an interesting English example from "Ye Olde Reine Deere" hotel, Banbury. This is from a room in pure Elizabethan,
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A fine example of the period. The earliest English Windsor chairs seem to have been made with splatted backs. Were any such made by Colonial craftsmen? I cannot recall having seen any. In Figure 5 is shown a chair of Queen Anne’s day. It has a Dutch appearance both in the bandy legs and a certain heaviness of effect. It has none of the lightness to be seen in chairs of Colonial origin, and is for this reason the more interesting as an exhibit.

As regards lightness of effect, the Colonial craftsmen assuredly improved on mother-country methods. They were evidently not satisfied to simply duplicate English models, but managed to improve on them both as regards design and execution. The Colonial maker of inexpensive chairs in his output displayed not only marked originality, but excellent taste as well. Some of the cheap light chairs of Colonial times have been copied by present-day makers, and when enamelled or fashioned in choice woods, leave nothing to be desired for fashionable bedrooms.

To improve on Colonial chair designs is difficult, as many a modern designer who has attempted it will admit. It is something like the Colonial house, a plain building with all the ornament in the doorway, and when we attempt to embellish it we fail. The simple chairs of those days are probably appreciated among people of taste today as never before.

Not until the eighties of the last century were Windsor chairs made other than in birch, maple and the like. Some thirty years ago a few of our makers began turning out chairs of the Windsor and other Colonial patterns in mahogany. Now such chairs are to be found in the homes of people of wealth and substance. Made true to type and in the honest manner of the oldtime hand-craftsman, the chairs may seem costly when compared with others where everything is sacrificed to cheapness.

To appreciate the good and desirable in cabinetwork is not given to every one. The fine points both in design and execution are lost to the many. One cannot go far wrong, however, if choice be made of beautiful old forms such as are here delineated. Any first-class furniture establishment can be depended upon to supply the wants
of clients in this special line. Chairs peculiarly English in type would require making to order.

Figures 7 and 8 represent a type of lightly constructed though strongly built chairs found from time to time in New England States, but the latter of these is not very common. Chairs like Figure 7 varying considerably in small particulars are usual enough among old Puritan families in the vicinity of Boston. For armchairs they are small, an average man or woman fitting snugly into them. They are for this reason very comfortable, pressing against and supporting the body at every point. Such chairs painted in white or color, or made in mahogany, are very suitable for parlor or reception hall.

Figure 2 is also a satisfactory type of chair and most suitable for a lady. For a high-backed chair no more graceful model can be found than Figure 6.

**RECIPE FROM ELFLAND**

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In juice of mandrake and of cherry Steep a wild ripe trillium berry: Honey-horns of columbine Sweetest at the tips, Mingle next within the wine: Then of brier-rose hips One or two for spicier savor, And a clover-top to flavor.

In acorn-cup or foxglove bell Seal the wine and watch it well: When three moons have come and gone, Add a moon-parched seed Gathered at the peep o' dawn From the jewel-weed: Strain the vintage carefully Through a leaf of rosemary.

Let this, when duly passed upon, Be set aside for Oberon.

**Grace Hazard Conkling**