



COPTIC SPINDLE OF ABOUT 600 A. D.

A WEAVER'S EXPERIENCE

BY MADELEINE BURRAGE

MY mother weaves. She learned in England, in 1914, in a little old brick-and-timber thatched house with sweet lavender bushes growing on either side of the flagged walk from the tiny gate to the front door. In such an atmosphere you feel at once an immediate and pleasant necessity for spinning, dyeing, weaving. Wonderful colors, intricate patterns become your chief preoccupation. You are lost—to those friends who say, amusedly, “And how much can you make in an hour? Oh, only a yard!” Then invariably, after a pause, “I wonder how many yards a machine in a factory makes?” Quite as good cloth, too, you know—if not better, their tone implies. But you, in your turn, can also be amused. “All for weaving, and the Philistine well lost,” has become your watchword!

My mother wove ten yards of beautiful white homespun—and then came the war. The blue suit, which in England she had promised me so lightly, seemed in America only a beautiful idea. Old Swedish looms, such as she had woven on over there, were even more difficult to find than we had anticipated. In antique store after antique store it was the same story.

“You haven’t by chance an old loom?”

“Well, no. But I tell you I know where there is one, I think. I might be able to get it for you,” looking at you shrewdly to see if he can make a “good thing” out of it. “How much would it be worth to you? You might leave me your address.”

In the meantime, after an earnest comparison of numerous catalogs, each of which announced confidently, "Our loom is the best on the market!" my mother purchased as a makeshift a modern affair, which we well call the Yankee Contraption, an ingenious, very much simplified machine adapted only for plain weaving.

However, I felt that it would do very well for my promised suit. And now for the wool! Obviously, the best place to buy wool would be a woolen company. I set out light-heartedly, believing in my innocence that wool buying would be as simple a matter as the purchasing of a paper of pins. (As a matter of fact it constitutes one of those innumerable Extension Courses in the School of Experience.) In elaborate, mahogany-furnished offices I fingered samples of yarns and became more and more perplexed.

"Is this all wool?" I finally ventured, doubtfully. "It—it doesn't seem *woolen* exactly."

The dapper young man took a deep, bored breath. He flicked the samples and said, reprovingly, "Very fine quality."

"But I wanted a woollier wool," I tried to explain. In my mind's eye I saw a fat and docile lamb standing ready to give up a soft, crinkly coat to me. Obviously, the next minute I had an inspiration. "Thank you very much," I said hastily. "May I have these samples? I should like to think it over."

"Family," I said, when I reached home, "let us buy a lamb, two, three lambs! They can keep the lawn mowed and raise my suit at the same time. Then, too, afterwards you know," I added temptingly, "lamb and mint jelly!"

The family exhibited no enthusiasm. Bolshevism had not then claimed the Handy Man for its own, and they began showering me with pertinent questions as to rearing, shearing, and kindred arts.

My lovely plan faded.

But still I cherished a vague wraith of it. If anyone said to me, "Oh, does your mother weave?" I used to reply, "Yes, and if we can ever find any real wool she is going to weave me a suit." "How interesting!" the impressed listener would murmur. But the matter never went any further, until one day a visitor instead of making this familiar comment, took my breath away by saying calmly, "Oh, really? Do you want wool? We have sheep, you know. When we shear I'll send you word."

Weeks passed. It must be confessed that I had completely forgotten the promise. And then one day came a telegram, "Do you still want wool?"

"Wait!" I cried to the telephone operator, when she had repeated the message. "Take this address. Send this reply, and, oh, rush it please! 'YES!'"

It came by express in a burlap bag, just as it does in the picture books, of course—

"Ba, ba, black sheep, have you any wool?
Yes, sir; no, sir; three bags full."

—beautiful, long wool, precisely as my imagination had pictured it while I was fingering those stiff, prickly samples of yarn in the salesrooms.

And now, first of all, it must be scoured. Scouring, it seems, is an art. And practically a lost one, we discovered, in our village.

"I never have," were the words that fell oftenest on our ears. Did you ever hear a New Englander say, "I never have"? They give the words a peculiar inflection. It makes you think, for some reason, of granite.

But finally someone said to us, "Well—I don't—know."

We dumped the bag at her feet and left hurriedly. A week later the wool came back to us a lovely, fluffy mass, oyster white, after nine washings!

During this time we had been anxiously hunting for a spinner. To our dismay, we discovered that the people who knew how to spin were all too old to undertake making yarn of thirty-six pounds of wool. And, besides, before it could be spun it must be carded. We became so inured to disappointing replies to our inquiries that we could scarcely believe our ears when we heard the words, "Oh, yes, I can card. But" (oh, yes, we had known it was too good to be true; of course there was a "but") "I haven't any carders."

"We will get you some," we chorused, enthusiastically. Where or how, we did not know, but pshaw! a little matter of carders! Why, there must be pairs in a dozen attics.

But, Reader, it is only in books that New Englanders carry everything out-of-date up into delightful attics and leave them until they become genuine antiques to be discovered by enraptured descendants. As an

actual matter of fact, periodically our housewives sally up into these attics and ruthlessly cast out quantities of valuable articles—like carders, for instance!

Literally, there were no carders in our village. But stay! We found at length a friend who had given a pair to a niece in a distant city who was "crazy about old things." She would write to her and ask for the loan of them if we would be *sure* to return them intact. We promised faithfully; the carders arrived and we presented them triumphantly to our spinner.

She accepted them rather glumly, we thought, but nevertheless she promised us the yarn "in about a month."

I felt as if my suit were an accomplished fact. I used often to go over and call on this talented person to see how affairs were progressing. That is, I used to try to call. Mysteriously, she seemed always to be out. She must spin, I concluded, at night. But, after all, so long as she spun, what difference did it make?

Obviously, it would have made no difference. But—she wasn't spinning!

One day, six weeks after we had delivered the carders to her, I met her by chance on the street.

"Oh, how is my wool coming on?" I cried.

"Well, I guess you'd better come and get it," she said.

"Oh, is it finished!" I exclaimed joyfully.

"Oh, no—no," she said. "I d'clare, I've been so rushed I ain't had a minute to touch it, an' I don't b'lieve I will. You'd better come an' get it."

Sorrowfully we returned the carders (intact, as per promise), and carried the wool home again. It stood in disgrace all winter in the barn.

Taking the matter up again in the spring, although without much hope of success, we heard that we "might" have it carded and spun in a little town back in the country. Of course, we despatched it post-haste, and waited impatiently for its return.

A month passed, six weeks. No wool. We wrote to ask the cause for the delay. Presently came the reply that it had never been received! It seemed the last straw. We set pen to paper and wrote back firmly that there must be some mistake, as we had a signed receipt for its delivery.

Mysteriously, the next day the yarn appeared, all neatly spun and

made into skeins. Fingering it, we discussed the advantages of knowing how to spin. It seemed a most desirable accomplishment.

After so many vicissitudes we really had to steel ourselves to send away even a part of it—enough for eight yards of cloth—to be dyed. For now, dear Reader, fall was again approaching—the second since the sheep had been sheared!—and a white suit scarcely seemed a necessity.

This time, however, quite without mishap, it returned to us a very satisfactory blue. You will readily understand that it was merely a labor of love for me to wind the skeins for the warp onto spools, for the setting up, and to make the rest into balls for convenience in later filling the shuttles.

And when at last my mother began to weave, I used to stand fascinated by the loom—undoubtedly very much in the way—and watch the cloth, so smooth, so firm and even, grow miraculously under her hand as she threw the shuttle back and forth. The excitement when she cut it from the loom!

I felt very much as the tailor did. He fingered it, looked at it, bent closer.

“Vot iss dis?” he said. “Notting like dis I ever saw. Vy, it’s—it must be—ALL WOOL!”

All wool indeed, and from the sheep’s back—no, I will not say straight!—from the sheep’s back to mine!