

WILLOW BASKETS THAT SHOW CRAFTSMANSHIP

married and was happy in his own home, but the ordinary ways of making a living seemed difficult for him to follow.

He had one asset, however, that counted for more than he knew. He was skilful with his hands and he had a feeling for line and form that sought expression whenever he tried to make anything. He had never learned any craft, but he liked to tinker at things and make what appealed to him. One day he began working with slender, pliable willow withes in the effort to make a basket. He knew nothing whatever of basketry, but the idea interested him sufficiently to induce him to keep on working until he got a method of his own and could shape the willow as he chose. He made one or two crude baskets; then better ones, and then one day he suddenly wove a basket



WILLOW BASKETS THAT SHOW THE TRUE SPIRIT OF HANDICRAFT

SOME years ago a man who had it in him to do unusual things began making baskets because apparently there was nothing else for him to do. He was the son of wealthy parents, but the odd one of the family. His brothers were all successful business or professional men, but this one man, besides possessing a temperament that did not take kindly to working in harness, was stone deaf, and for a while life was pretty hard for him. He was not in any sense a business man, but rather a poet and a dreamer, whose nature sought expression of its own ideals. His deafness shut him out from most of the activities of life, and his nature disinclined him for what was left. He was shielded from the world during his boyhood, and when he reached manhood he found that the world was too strong for him to grapple with. He

so beautiful that a friend who was able to appreciate such things bought it. Other friends saw it and asked him to make baskets for them, and so he established a little market among his own acquaintances, which gradually grew until people from different parts of the country were sending to him for baskets. His wife helped him with the work, and he got together several boys of the neighborhood who learned how to handle willow as he wished to see it handled, and the little home workshop flourished until it attracted the attention of the heads of a large manufacturing concern, who saw the possibilities in this use of willow and gave the man his chance by creating a department for his baskets in their factory. Things went well for about six months; then one day, as the man was crossing the railroad track on his way home, a train which he could not hear coming

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killed him instantly. This man was John Hubbard of Ashtabula, Ohio, and while not many people in this country know of his baskets, there are some who are wise enough in handicrafts to have seen them and appreciated their unusual beauty.

We have always held that basketry was

the rims and handles, and the way these rims and handles are twisted together, give an individuality to the work that could not be gained in any other way than that felt out by John Hubbard as he twisted and played with the pliable branches. Take, for example, the large waste basket. See the



one of the most interesting of the several forms of handicraft, but the trouble was to get the true feeling of handicraft into it. Most amateur basket makers imitate the Indian forms, designs and weaves, or else do more or less commonplace things with wicker and raffia, so that the majority of baskets made by craftworkers are not only inferior to the Indian work, but even to the ordinary commercial basket. The value of these willow baskets is that they take inevitably the forms that spring from the natural weaving together of pliable willow withes.

ease and naturalness with which a bunch of the thicker withes have been twisted together to form the rim, and the big vigorous sweep with which the handles spring from near the bottom and curve into the most natural shape for strength and convenience in handling. It is the sort of basket that a savage might have made, without knowledge that in doing the directly useful thing he was also producing a beautiful thing. The same simplicity and straightforwardness appear in all the work, and in each case the shape is perfect because it is so



The shapes are simple, the method of working primitive to a degree, yet the choice of the willow; the way it is woven together so that each basket seems to have grown of itself rather than to have been made according to any set pattern; the combination of the thin withes used for the body of the basket with the heavier branches that form

perfectly adapted to its use. In the case of the big wood basket that is meant to stand beside a fireplace, could anything be better adapted to the holding of half a dozen short, thick pieces of wood, cut and split into a convenient shape to rest upon the andirons?

The handle, which adds so much to the beauty of the piece, is strong enough to carry the whole load of wood from place to place, and the willow twigs of which the basket itself is woven are so sturdy that even hard usage would not knock it to pieces. The other pieces are umbrella stands, hanging baskets for flower pots,

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waste baskets, jardinières, work baskets,—in fact, baskets for every kind of household use,—and it is hard to say which of them all is the best.

Another thing that Mr. Hubbard developed to a rare degree of beauty was his use of stains. He found the right ones by dint of constant experimenting, and he used them as seemed best to him. Some of the baskets have the green of young willow

and it can be made to conform to every line and curve that means added beauty and comfort.

The great difficulty with basket furniture hitherto has been the prevalence of stiff, fanciful over-ornamented wicker furniture, which is almost as rigid as wood and usually is thoroughly artificial in design, having none of the characteristics of handicraft. This sort of willow basketry,



branches, turning brown in places as if the branches had dried slightly; others are as brown as if the withes were wholly dry; still others are gray,—apparently weather beaten to a silver tone. These are the predominant colors, but there are all sorts of combinations of them, all three sometimes appearing in one basket, so that the color is as natural and inevitable as the form and the weave.

Other craftworkers may not be able to make baskets as vigorously beautiful as these, but anyone who thoroughly appreciates the spirit which prompted Mr. Hubbard's work can at least go to work in the same direct way to do things which are equally straightforward. At any rate, the knowledge of a craft like this is thoroughly worth while, for it contains the very essence of the spirit that goes into the making of simple and beautiful things. When we seek the power of spontaneous expression it is very apt to elude us, for individuality is the most elusive thing and as a rule insists upon expressing itself in its own way. We do all we can to prevent it by training ourselves to work along lines marked out by other people, but once in a while some worker dares to be natural as Mr. Hubbard was, and then we get work that is worth remembering.

The best part of it is that this method of handling willow is equally applicable to chairs, settles, couches, cradles, garden seats,—in fact any sort of furniture for which willow may be used. Naturally, for very heavy pieces or for tables it is not suitable, but for all seat furniture it is the ideal material, as its basket construction causes it to bend into any shape desired,

on the contrary, is the most natural form of handicraft that could be imagined, and one of the most desirable to be pursued either by individuals or by small communities as a home or village industry.

There is a sure market for the basket maker's wares, provided he makes articles that are useful and durable as well as beautiful. We need in this country a touch of that regard for the minor graces of life which appeals to us so strongly when we see it abroad. For example, when one sees in London a sturdy willow basket, holding a peck and heaped high with the enormous strawberries that grow over there, the sight is much more tempting than that of our berries packed into the flimsy little wooden boxes we are so fond of in this country. The English "rim peck" is not only an article of the most ordinary use on the farms and in the markets; it is also a basket as beautiful in its way as those illustrated here, and so unusual that the American traveler is more than likely to bring two or three of them home as waste baskets. There is no reason why we should not put up our own small fruits,—and large ones too for that matter,—in such baskets as these for the market, nor why our household and farm utensils should not have the same sort of homely attractiveness that is always found in the simple home-made article. There should be a good sale for flower baskets, especially around Easter, and a good demand for the finer baskets might easily be worked up by suggesting them for candy baskets, fruit baskets and the like, to be put to other uses after the contents have been removed.