

## A PEEP INTO SERICULTURE

BY GERTRUDE WHITING

**W**HILE we were on a holiday in Italy a few years ago, there came an unseasonable frost that set back the mulberry trees. So the silkworm raisers' children were busy day and night trying to find enough mulberry leaves to feed the seemingly insatiable worms. These creatures were kept on trays, arranged one above another, in an evenly heated room, where their guardians chatted and ate polenta, while they took turns in watching the open fire by day and night, and in removing the stems and veins of the leaves—tough parts discarded by the fastidious worms. The steady crunch of these myriads of little creatures was distinctly audible!

After a period of gorging themselves, the worms are ready to hibernate, so to speak. A number of boxes about a foot square, but without fronts, are arranged upon the shelves where the trays have been spread; and twigs are stuck into the compartments in somewhat diagonal upright positions. The silkworms attach themselves to the boughs and, working, from the outside inwards, spin themselves into cocoons. These are white, pale or orange yellow, according to whether the inhabitant be blond, auburn or brunette.

Fortune favored us, for we were able after the cocoons were complete to arrange to have our afternoon tea upon the cocoon buyer's lawn, where we could watch the peasants and their children in their sabots, clambering down the steep, tortuous little round cobble-stoned paths, with buckets, baskets, hods and wooden cases full of cocoons upon their heads. These various household containers were emptied into an outspread sheet, which was gathered up by the corners and set upon a large scale. The peasant in question was then paid by weight for his load of cocoons; whereupon he hurried off to refill his bucket or hod.

The little elongated glossy balls were next tumbled into great long cylindrical baskets, each holding, I believe, eighty pounds. These were piled mountain high, the baskets lying across from side to side, upon somewhat diminutive carts, drawn by dear dishevelled little donkeys, who in turn were led and prodded by still more diminutive and ragged urchins.

The ponderous baskets were then dumped aboard steamers that carried the unsuspecting silkworms to the executioner's to be electrocuted or cremated in ovens, so that the innocent creatures could not begin to wake up and bite their way out, thus cutting their silky covering into short strands.

At this point the cocoons are thrust into hot water, to loosen them and remove some of the gums. Girls or women with very delicate tactile sense feel for the outer end of the cocoon strand. It is almost imperceptible to the eye. The strands from nine cocoons are thrown over a little wire hook, which guides them together on to a reel, and the precious product is ready to be spun into thread.

Some cocoons are peanut-shaped, instead of being evenly elliptical. This narrow "waist" is undesirable and growers are trying to eliminate it. It is by proper feeding that the wild worm has been cultivated to give more even and less gummy fibre. The Tussah silk that we use for embroidery and lace-making comes from a large semi-wild worm of Manchuria. At Nanking students are experimenting to find the amount of silk produced per unit of food consumed by some twenty-nine different sorts of worm, the results varying from forty-two to one hundred and thirty-five grams of silk per kilogram of leaves, and the amount of silk reeled from different worms from some sixteen to about twenty-eight grams, so careful breeding is indeed important even in sericulture.

Later we had the privilege of sitting in the angle of an L-shaped establishment, where we could watch either the shop end or the manufacturing end. Peasants came to the shop counter for silk, which was weighed out to them. In time they would return with silk woven into the typical Roman blankets. Of course, we could not wait to see these same women come back: but others who had finished their blankets, brought them to our merchant host. Again the silk was weighed—this time to see that the cottage worker had not retained any of it for her own purposes or to sell on the sly. If all were well, she was paid and the blanket was brought



A CART WITH BASKETS FILLED WITH COCOONS

into the manufacturing end of the establishment, around the corner, out of sight of the counter. The blanket was tacked up to the wall and a young girl curry-combed it thoroughly to give it the requisite shaggy surface. Then the finished product was returned to the shop for its final turnover—its sale to you or me.



ALLE BELLE ET VIR-  
TVDIOSE DONNE

MATTHIO PAGAN

*Vago volto, occhio schivo, & casto il petto  
Arte son vera, afar le Donne belle  
Io per ornar, piu la virtu di quelle,  
Opre rare, scoprir, sempre affretto.  
Havran l'alme fanciulle tal diletto  
Dipingendo con l'Ago, quasi Apelle  
Con quelle bianche, schiette mani isnelle  
Ch'io non so se piu sia il nome o l'effetto.  
Penelope, & Aragne nel Thelaro  
Stavan sovente molto piu felice  
Lucretia fu, nel fil che per li amori.  
Simil di voi, ne vi sera mancato  
Tesser girlande ch'or tesser vi lice  
Ne giamai sia Giardin c'habbia tal fiori.*

*In Venetia per Matthio Pagan, in Frezaria all' Insegna  
della Fede MDLIIII.*

—Giardineto Novo di Punto Tagliati