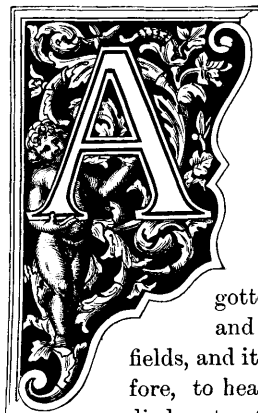


Silk-weaving in the East-End.



AT the time of the marriage of Princess Louise of Wales to the Duke of Fife, last year, a paragraph which caused some surprise was to the effect that the finest length of silk in her trousseau had been woven in Bethnal Green. The present generation seems to have forgotten how some of the best silks and satins were produced at Spitalfields, and it was somewhat astonishing, therefore, to hear that the craft had not entirely died out. Certainly it is a tiny trade compared with what it used to be, but still, in the very heart of crowded Bethnal Green, a little colony of silk-weavers still exists. Many of them are direct descendants of the old Huguenot refugees who fled here for shelter after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes, and brought over with them the secrets of the loom. From father to son the traditions have been handed down, and in the last thirty years very few outsiders have come into the trade. There is a kind of exclusiveness and pride about these old weavers in their beautiful technical art, and well there may be, for in all its branches it is very skilled labour, requiring a correct eye and a delicate touch.

In order to understand the present condition of the silk trade in the East-end, it is necessary to go back to the year 1860, when the practically prohibitive duty on foreign manufactured silk goods was removed. The immediate result was an English market flooded with cheap showy wares, produced under conditions of cheaper labour and lower rents than either Spitalfields or Coventry could command, to say nothing of tricks of adulteration unknown to our own manufacturers. For a time these two centres struggled on against the heavy draw backs imposed upon them by French and Italian rivals, only to be beaten in the end, and to lose the commercial greatness they once enjoyed. That the trade is actually and relatively but a shadow of what it formerly was, will be judged best from the fact that in 1828 there were 25,000 looms at work in Spitalfields alone, giving occupation to 60,000 workmen and 2,000 dyers, while at the present moment scarcely 800 looms exist, and many of these are not in constant use. From as accurate a calculation as could be made last year, it is believed that there are not more than about 1,100 weavers and 90 dyers concerned in it at the present moment. When one considers the growth of population, and the present demand for really high-class dress fabrics, the diminution is a startling one indeed.

Without any exaggeration it may be said that everything adverse has fought against the industry for the past thirty years. In former days most of the work was done by the weavers in their own homes, when they were assisted by their families, brought their sons up to

follow the craft, and took numerous apprentices to teach. As the old tenements and cottages are condemned in the onward march of municipal improvements, and "model dwellings" and railway stations and factories are reared in their stead, no place is found for the old looms. They require far more space than could be given in the prim squareness of an "artisan set," and so the two or three firms who have had the foresight and courage to keep the industry from perishing from utter inanition, have been forced to build factories for the accommodation of their workers. The old people grow attached to their looms, and it is quite pathetic to hear how they come and ask their employers to purchase them, when they find it impossible to erect them elsewhere for themselves. Many of these looms are so old that their woodwork will not even bear removal, but, with tender regard for faithful old servants, their owners cannot bear the idea of their being broken up as mere lumber.

It is hardly necessary to say that all the weaving is done by hand-machinery, and no steam-power whatever is used for it. The looms are what are known now as "Jacquard," though considerable modifications have been wrought in them in the ninety years that have elapsed since Napoleon publicly rewarded the clever inventor before the Conservatoire des Arts et Métiers of Paris. To the onlooker it appears the clumsiest and most complex bit of mechanism ever produced. An elaborate design in brocade frequently requires several weeks to prepare before the actual weaving can be commenced. The factory that I visited belongs to Messrs. Warner and Ram, and besides being the largest one, may also be regarded as quite typical of the others, and here an old man is employed to "read" the pattern.

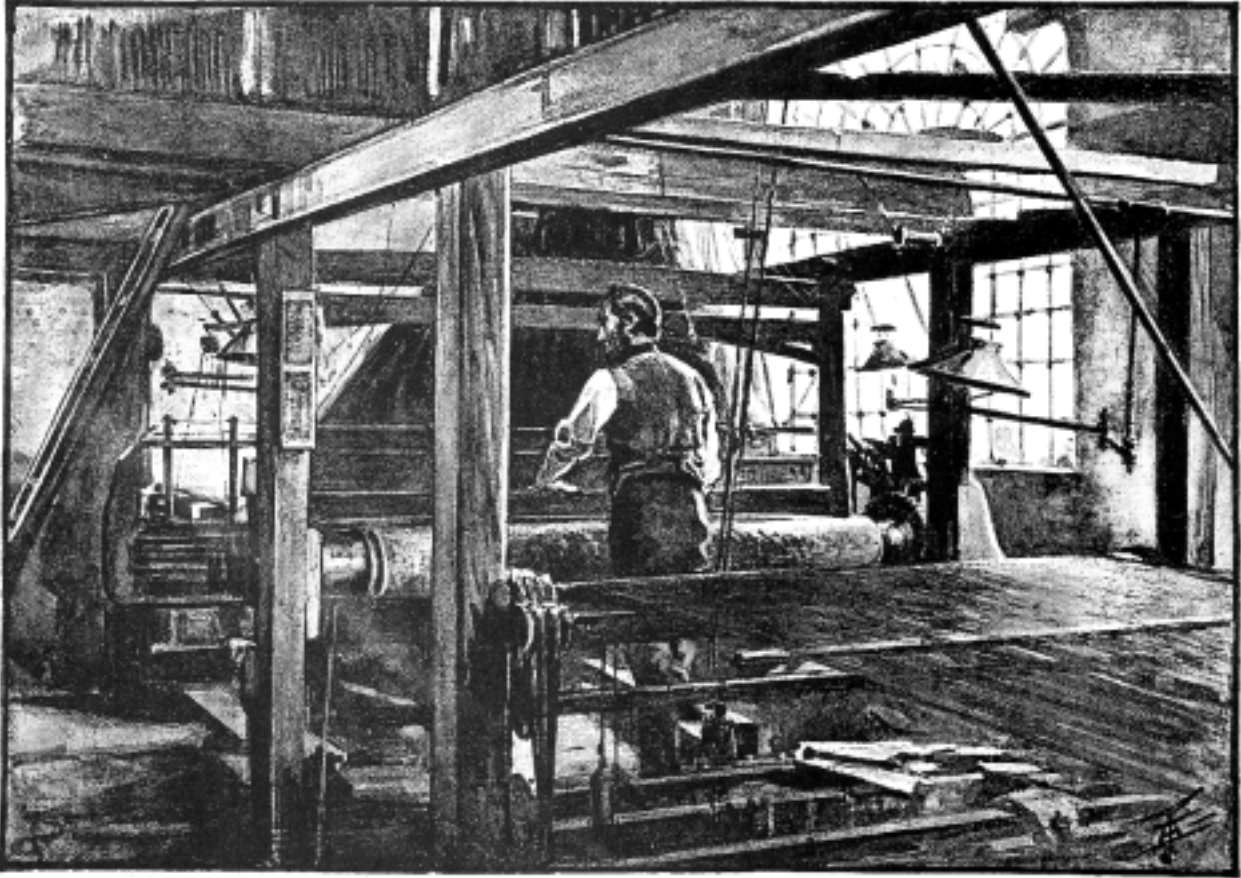
A handsome design for a furniture brocade, drawn by Mr. Owen Jones, illustrates the first process in the hand-weaving of any figured silk. It has been magnified to what one might term heroic proportions, with the position of every thread shown like a small rope, and the colours indicated in most glaring contrasts of orange, green, blue, and violet. The man stands before an intricate web of strings, every one of which represents a coloured strand of the design, and of these he chooses with marvellous and unerring accuracy the ones he wants, lacing into them horizontal strings. As soon as he has gone right across, he pulls a bar, and as the tightened cords communicate with corresponding metal pegs over his head, they are forced through a strip of card, the holes in which represent a fraction of the whole pattern. Very few brochés or brocatelles need less than 18,000 of these slips of card, and an elaborate one requires from 43,000 to 47,000 of them. One design in the possession of this firm takes upwards of 50,000, and they weigh a ton and a half.

They are next joined in proper order, and this is usually done by boys. Every single thread of the horizontal warp is passed through a tiny oval glass bead, technically called

"the neck," and so tedious is this part of the work that it takes two girls fully two days to accomplish it in even the dress width of silk. These strands are strained over two rollers as tightly as the strings of a violin at concert pitch, by means of weights attached to the rollers. Nothing perhaps impresses the visitor with a greater idea of the primitiveness of the mechanism which produces results

rosebuds, tied with pale blue ribbons, upon a lovely "oyster-white" ground, it indicates the possession of a good memory to reproduce it, as I saw one man doing, absolutely by heart.

There is, however, a greater complication still, should the pattern contain any velvet, whether cut or *frisé*, and some even have both. To explain how these are produced



A BETHNAL GREEN WEAVER AT WORK AT THE LOOM.

so artistically lovely than the appliance for the weights. It is nothing but a long wooden trough tied by ropes to the rollers, and filled with paving-stones, bits of old iron, fragments of lead-piping, and other such rough material.

The preliminaries thus gone through for the arrangement or "setting" of a loom, more elaborate machinery of hooks and threads has to be set working in order to drop through its proper hole in the card every thread required to produce the pattern. When that is done, the weaver fills his shuttles with the exquisitely fine strands of colour required in the pattern, and with his foot sets his machine in motion. By a further clever device, practically automatic in action, a tiny bell rings whenever he has to take up a new shuttle full of colours; and when he has been over his pattern once or twice, he needs no chart or fixed order of his shades, but his hand takes up the right one with unerring certainty, so perfectly developed is his memory. In a self-coloured brocade or damask, the shuttle shoots to and fro with no change, but where several tints are employed, as in the instance of an exquisite Empire design of many-hued

would require elaborate technical details, very difficult to make clear upon paper. I was shown several designs of which, with the best industry in the world, a man could not produce a yard a day. Little wonder, then, is it if we have to pay from thirty to forty shillings a yard for the magnificent damassés of a Court train. But I think it was in the department which belongs in this factory to one very old man exclusively that I felt the greatest amazement.

I have alluded previously to the exceeding monotony of "necking" the warp threads on to a loom, and whenever this can be avoided, it is done. Suppose that a piece of brocade having a pale yellow warp was last woven, and the next one is to have it of delicate pink, it is cheaper in that case to waste a yard and a half of the threads to join them, but to do this is not in everyone's power. This old man has devoted himself to it, and there he sits, hour after hour, in the very midst of countless strands of silk, not one of them coarser than a human hair, taking up one thread at a time of either colour, and giving it one deft twist with his thick bent

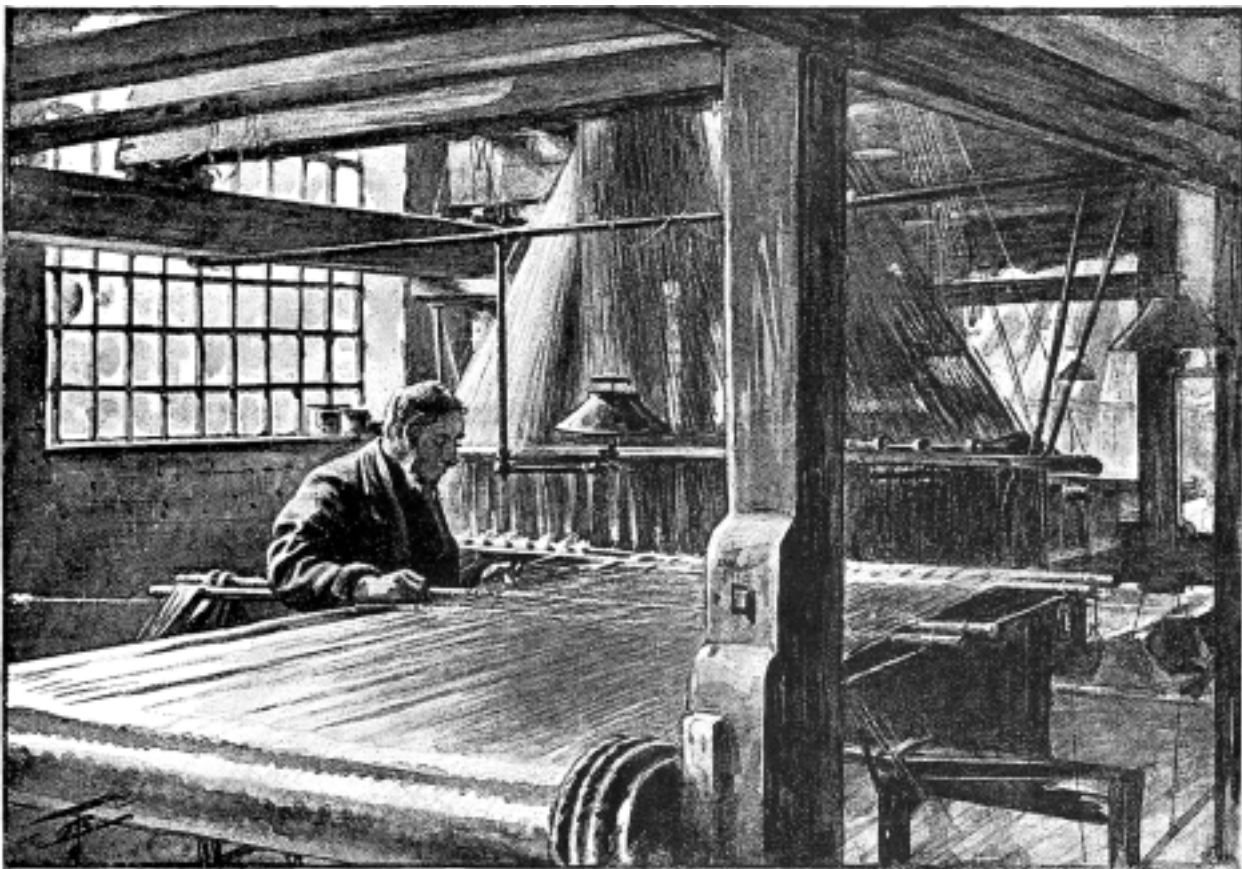
old fingers to form a knot neither to be pulled apart nor unravelled.

It is perfectly marvellous to watch him. He never makes a mistake in the order in which he takes either the old or the new strands, and the quick dexterous motions of his fingers are only to be compared to the movements of a virtuoso's hand on the violin in a *prestissimo* passage of *arpeggios*. But every worker employed seemed a perfect master of the technique of his art, from the man who read the cards to the young girls engaged over the simple though tedious process of "necking."

Nothing but the richest brocades and figured silks are woven here, and in many instances, the retail prices of the silks used for panellings or portières would be from £3 to £5 a yard. The furniture silks are of extraordinary thickness and richness, and perfectly pure unweighted material is employed for them throughout. On one of the looms was a magnificent crimson damask of a design which has been in possession of the firm some forty-five years. "That," remarked Mr. Warner, my courteous and well-informed guide, "is a Government

telles and damassés to suit every style of furniture upon the looms. For the bright gilding and ornament of the Louis Quinze period, were roses and ribbons upon white or Rose du Barri, and for the Empire were tiny garlands and forget-me-nots scattered over golden satin or quaint rayé grounds. In exquisite taste was one intended for a Chippendale room of dull gold and pale brown, and a beautiful brocade of shades of réséda would have harmonised with any "fitments." "It may surprise you to hear," said Mr. Warner, "that America is buying these silks very largely now. They see how unique and essentially artistic they are, and even the prohibitive duties on manufactured goods are no barrier to them."

And the dress silks! But no descriptions could do them justice. One loom was employed upon a white broché, not of very elaborate design, but specially pointed out to me as the most absolutely perfect and snowy white that the modern chemists' resources could give. One's linen cuffs, and a sheet of clean letter paper, certainly assumed the most "grubby" tint beside the clear dazzling purity of this ideal bridal robe. Empire designs are in



JOINING THE WARP.

order, and is intended for one of the foreign embassies." He then turned the gas upon it, and it assumed a yet more lovely hue, with high lights and shades playing across it. "Now," he said, "imagine what a becoming background that will be for handsome dresses and fair faces. Red and rich blue are almost invariably chosen for Government orders of that kind." There were broca-

great request still, and likely to continue so. Many of the best are correct reproductions of the patterns of this epoch. The most elaborate piece of weaving-silk in hand on this occasion had a highly raised ground of *Armure royale*, in colour a delicate mignonette. Over this was a many-hued running design of small flowers, sometimes of satin, at other times of *frisé* weaving. It will

give some idea of the complications of this piece of work if I say that a skilled hand employed upon it for a full working day, could not produce nearly one yard of it. Several specimens of these beautiful goods were exhibited in the Paris Exhibition, where they were declared by the judges to be fully equal to the products of the best French and Italian firms, and were duly awarded prizes and medals. When, however, the moment came for the actual bestowal of the awards, they were withheld upon the mean and quibbling ground that they were exhibited in the name of Messrs. Lewis and Allenby, and not of the actual manufacturers. This was a sore disappointment to the poor weavers themselves, who would have been entitled to a bronze medal, which, with their true artists' pride in their work, they would have valued very highly.

It is hoped that the exhibition of English silks, deferred unfortunately until next year, may result in the establishment of a technical school of silk-weaving. This would be a useful step towards bringing more hands into the craft. But this ought not to be too long delayed. We must catch and crystallise all those fine traditions of thoroughness of work which these clever old artist-craftsmen still display. Then, too, we want a little more patriotism

on the part of Englishwomen to help their own industries. They should be more like the Countess of Bective, who a few years since exerted herself so successfully to bring the claims of Bradford woollen manufacturers into fashionable repute. It is, to a thoughtful woman, saddening and heartbreaking to see the squalor and poverty of this teeming East-end district, and then to think that a splendid industry such as this might be allowed to languish and decay. This is no question of choosing ugly or inferior goods for the sake of a cause. They are in all respects equal to the foreign goods so largely bought. Possibly it may give a needed impetus to the trade when it is known that the Princess of Wales, with that same unerring taste which has taught her the beauties of Irish lace, is a regular and constant purchaser and wearer of the Bethnal Green silks. What she does, it is to be hoped other ladies will also do, for a steady request for these lovely wares will develop a branch of artistic commerce capable of giving competence to thousands. "Create the demand, the supply will come," is an economic axiom which sensible women would do well to remember with regard to the silk-weaving industry of the East-end.

M. F. BILLINGTON.