



THE TALE
OF THE
SPINNING-WHEEL

BY

ELIZABETH CYNTHIA BARNEY BUEL

*Regent "Mary Floyd Tullmadge Chapter," Daughters
of the American Revolution*

ILLUSTRATED BY

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OF A PIONEER SCHOOL"

LITCHFIELD, CONNECTICUT

MCMIII

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ELIZABETH CYNTHIA BARNEY BUEL

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DEDICATED
IN GRATEFUL AFFECTION
TO
THE MARY FLOYD TALLMADGE CHAPTER
DAUGHTERS OF THE AMERICAN
REVOLUTION
WHOSE READY SYMPATHY AND ENTHUSIASM
HAVE NEVER FAILED IN WORK FOR
"HOME AND COUNTRY"

INTRODUCTORY NOTE

THE Tale of the Spinning-Wheel is revised and enlarged from a paper read before the Litchfield Historical Society, Litchfield, Connecticut; New England Society in the City of New York, Waldorf-Astoria, New York City; Mary Floyd Tallmadge Chapter, D. A. R., Litchfield; Judea Chapter, D. A. R., Washington, Connecticut; Massachusetts Society of the Colonial Dames of America, Boston; Katherine Gaylord Chapter, D. A. R., Bristol, Connecticut; Connecticut Society of the Colonial Dames of America, New Haven, and also in Hartford; Denver Chapter, D. A. R., Denver, Colorado; Warren and Prescott Chapter, D. A. R., Boston, Massa-

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chusetts; Orford Parish Chapter, D. A. R., South Manchester, Connecticut; National Arts Club, New York; Esther Stanley Chapter, D. A. R., New Britain, Connecticut; Annual Spring Conference, Connecticut D. A. R., at Middletown; Dorothy Ripley Chapter, D. A. R., Southport, Connecticut; Wiltwyck Chapter, D. A. R., Kingston, New York; Litchfield Club, Litchfield, Connecticut, etc., etc.

**THE TALE OF
THE SPINNING-WHEEL**

*"Queens of Homespun, out of whom we draw
our royal lineage."*—HORACE BUSHNELL.

THE TALE OF THE SPINNING-WHEEL

THE spinning-wheel—symbol of the dignity of woman's labor.—What wealth of memory gathers around the homely implement, homely indeed in the good old sense of the word—because belonging to the home. Home-made and home-spun are honorable epithets, replete with significance, for in them we find the epitome of the lives and labors of our foremothers. The plough and the axe are not more symbolic of the winning of this country from the wilderness, nor the musket of the winning of its freedom, than is the spinning-wheel in woman's hands the symbol of both. So symbolic is it also of woman's toil, of woman's distinctive and universal occupation, nay, of woman herself, that the "distaff side of the house" has always been expressive of the woman's family, and "spinster" is still the legal title of unmarried women in the common law of England. Most ancient of all household implements, it has been used

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in one form or another by queen, princess, and serving-maid, by farmer's wife and noble's daughter, until it stands to-day a silent witness to the fundamental democracy of mankind.

"When Adam delved and Eve span,
Where was then the gentleman?"

The mutual dependence of spinning and agriculture, of woman's work and man's, is also strikingly illustrated by a carving on an old sarcophagus in the Church of St. John Lateran in Rome, depicting the Eternal Father giving to Adam an instrument of tillage, and to Eve a distaff and spindle. Thus, coeval with man's first appearance on this earth, no written page of history, no musty parchment or sculptured stone, is so old that we cannot find upon it some traces of the spindle and distaff with their tale of joys and sorrows spun into the thread by the fingers of patient women whose hearts beat as our own to-day, in tune with the common throb of humanity. Though we may strain our eyes into the darkness of prehistoric ages, when primeval woman used the tree-

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trunk of the forest for a distaff, we will still find there some evidence of the use of flax and hemp for threads and ropes. Even in the lake-dwellings of Switzerland, belonging to the Stone Age, we see their use in various ways—in the fishing lines and



nets, in the cords for carrying heavy vessels, and in the ropes necessary to the erection of these very lake-dwellings themselves. "Rough or unworked flax," says Keller, "is found in the lake-dwellings made into bundles, or what are technically called heads, and . . . it was perfectly clean and ready for use."

Stepping across the threshold of history, we learn that sixty-five centuries ago there lived in Egypt a king of the recently discovered first dynasty, who, as his name, Mernit-Ata, signifies, put his trust in the goddess Neith, the all-sustaining mother of

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the universe; and in his tomb to-day has been found a large upright slab, five feet high, whereon are carved the emblems of this goddess—two arrows crossed on an upright distaff. Here, in the dim morning of history, we find the distaff already honored as the sacred symbol of this feminine divinity, in whose eternal motherhood the Egyptians vaguely recognized that mysterious Power from which all things proceed. This was no prehistoric age of barbarism, for in the University Museum in London are now to be seen the relics of this long lost first dynasty, unearthed at Abydos within the last four years by Dr. Flinders Petrie—relics of a civilization already far advanced. We stand face to face with their weapons of war and of the chase, their household implements, their exquisitely carved ivories and gold jewelry and coins, their very clothing of fine linen, the work of the spinsters of those days, and the brain reels with the thought that even before them there were generations upon generations of human beings living in organized societies and practising the arts and engaged in the occupations of a high

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order of civilized life. The whole course of the first dynasty is now laid bare to us, and we find that its beginning in 4700 B. C. is modern history compared with the periods of development that must have gone before, for there is proof positive that even before this dynasty, ten other kings reigned in Egypt, and other hands grew flax on the banks of the Nile and spun and wove it into Egypt's far-famed linen. In ancient Egypt linen occupied a most important place; it was worn by all classes, alive or dead, and it was the only material that the priestly orders were allowed to wear. We have all seen the beautiful mummy linen found wrapped around the mummies even of the most remote antiquity; and we know that only the best that Egypt could produce would be wound around the sacred bodies of their dead. This mummy-linen was not spun on a wheel, but on a hand-distaff, called sometimes a rock, such as the women of India use to this day in spinning the fine thread of India muslin, and such as was also used by the children of our American colonists while tending sheep and cattle in



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the field. The spinning-wheel as we know it is of much later date. It does not appear until the fifteenth century,—although the date of the first wool-wheel is placed by one



Woman spinning. 14th century

authority in the fourteenth century,—before which time all spinning of wool, flax, and cotton was done on the primitive distaff tucked under the left arm in the way so familiar to us in pictures of peasant girls and Greek

maidens spinning as they walk. Woman's first distaff was the trunk of a tree; her spindle a rude stick, on which she wound and twisted the yarn as her fingers laboriously pulled and shaped it from the flax wrapped around the trunk. From this distaff of nature it was but a step to the manufactured distaff of history. This distaff was a staff about three feet long; the lower end was held between the left arm and the side; the upper end was wrapped with the material to be spun. The thread was

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passed through, and guided by, the fingers of the left hand, and was drawn and twisted by those of the right, and wound on the suspended spindle, made so as to be revolved like a top, which completed the twist by its own impetus and weight. The illustration shows a distaff of the fifteenth century supported by a rude stand, leaving the left arm free to hold the spindle. In this slow and simple fashion the clothing of all the world was spun before the fifteenth century, and still is spun to-day in many lands. The spinning-wheel simply took the distaff as it was, and attached a wheel and treadle to revolve the spindle; and the vast machines of modern industry merely elaborate and multiply into many spindles this simple device of previous ages. The principle remains absolutely the same, so much so that we may say that from tree-trunk to modern factory the methods of preparing



Woman spinning
15th century

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and spinning flax have changed the least of all the industries, the sculptures of ancient Egypt depicting processes which are easily recognizable as those practised to-day not only in Egypt, but also by the modern Finn, Lapp, Norwegian, and Belgian flax-grower. The paintings in the grotto of El Kab show the pulling, stocking, tying, and rippling of flax just as it is done in Egypt now; and our own colonists of a hundred years ago followed precisely the same methods as the Egyptian, who preceded him in the world's history by sixty-five hundred years. Pliny's description of Egyptian flax-culture and preparation reads like an account of the labors of our own foremothers; and the walls of ancient tombs are covered with pictures of the old familiar process. Egyptian flax went to all parts of the world and occupied a foremost place as an article of commerce, for linen was the staple fabric for clothing of all the ancient peoples. Pieces of linen are still found clinging to skeletons in the tombs of the Chaldeans, and it was the national dress of the Babylonians and Persians. All who are familiar with the

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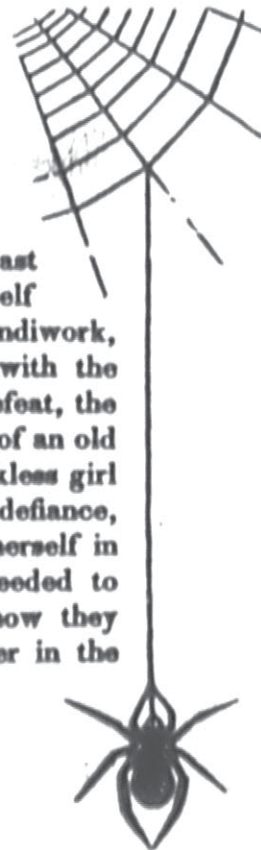
Bible know the importance accorded to flax and the flax-spinner among the Hebrews. Joseph did not need to go to Pharaoh to be clothed "in vestures of fine linen," if the women of his time were as deft at spinning as those women of a later day who brought their offerings to the furnishing of the tabernacle in the wilderness. "All the women that were wise-hearted did spin with their hands, and brought that which they had spun, both of blue and of purple and of scarlet and of fine linen. And all the women whose heart stirred them up in wisdom spun goat's hair;" "wise-hearted," because in them "the Lord put wisdom and understanding to know how to work all manner of work for the service of the sanctuary" — guided in their handiwork by the spirit of God, which fills not only poet and prophet, but artist and artisan as well. What a hum there must have been in the Israelitish camp as the women set hands to the spindle and took up the distaff, and the sound of many feet went through the tents, as they walked back and forth, pulling out the long threads that were to hang in beautiful fabrics of

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embroidered woollen and linen cloth around about the tabernacle! "Thou shalt make the tabernacle with ten curtains of fine twined linen. . . . The length of one curtain shall be eight and twenty cubits, and the breadth of one curtain four cubits; And thou shalt make curtains of goats' hair to be a covering upon the tabernacle: eleven curtains shalt thou make. The length of one curtain shall be thirty cubits, and the breadth of one curtain four cubits." A hanging for the door was also made of "fine twined linen." A cubit was about one and eight tenths of a foot: the amount of laborious spinning represented by those curtains will be better understood when we see later on the slowness of the process; and yet so much was sent in that Moses was obliged to give commandment, saying, "Let neither man nor woman make any more work for the offering of the sanctuary." Thus the Hebrew sanctuary of God, the sacred place of the ark, was built up, in this fifteenth century before Christ, on the foundations of woman's labor.

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Let us turn for a moment to Greece. Once more we find woman's handiwork holding an honorable place, for the patron goddess of spinning, weaving, and needlework is none other than Pallas Athene, the warrior goddess of wisdom, founder and protector of Athens, and herself a spinner acknowledging no rival among gods or men. Who does not know how the full fury of her godhead was let loose upon the luckless Arachne, that mortal woman who dared challenge her to a competition in spinning and weaving? Overhearing Arachne's boast that not even Pallas Athene herself could surpass the beauty of her handiwork, and that she would try her skill with the goddess, or suffer the penalty of defeat, the wrathful divinity assumed the form of an old woman, and tried to induce the reckless girl to desist. Arachne persisted in her defiance, even when the goddess revealed herself in all her majesty. They then proceeded to the competition. Ovid tells us how they wrought, each surpassing the other in the



ARACHNE

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wonderful living pictures woven into the web, until at last the insulted goddess shattered the mortal's loom to atoms, and revealed to Arachne the full extent of her impiety. Unable to endure the thought of her guilt and shame, she hanged herself forthwith. The goddess pitied her as she hung, and touching her said: "Live: and that you may preserve the memory of this lesson, continue to hang, both you and your descendants, to all future times." To this day the spider, Nature's busy spinner, bears witness to her fate, and to the outraged dignity of the goddess who thus honored the spinster's art by competing therein with a mortal. Surely the much abused epithet of "spinster" is entitled to respect, more especially as this divine spinster honored also the unmarried state in choosing ever to "pursue her maiden meditations fancy free."

Thus does Theocritus apostrophize the distaff:—

"O distaff, practised in wool-spinning, gift of the
blue-eyed Minerva,

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Labor at thee is fitting to wives who seek the
good of their husbands!
Trustfully come thou with me to the far famous
city of Neleus,

So that, O distaff of ivory cunningly fashioned, I
give thee
Into the hands of the wife of Nicias, the skilled
and the learned!
So shalt thou weave mantles for men and trans-
parent tissues for women.

And at the sight, O my distaff, shall one woman
say to another:
Surely great grace lies in trifles, and gifts from
friends are most precious!"

This recalls Alcandra's gift of a golden distaff to Helen of Troy; and an interesting companion picture to these ancient Greeks is our own Benjamin Franklin, who thus presents a spinning-wheel to his sister in a letter dated Jan. 6, 1736: —

"DEAR SISTER, — I am highly pleased with the account Captain Freeman gives me of you. I always judged from your behavior when a child, that you would make a good,

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agreeable woman, and you know you were ever my peculiar favorite. I have been thinking what would be a suitable present for me to make, and for you to receive, as I hear you are grown a celebrated beauty. I had almost determined on a tea-table; but when I consider that the character of a good house-wife was far preferable to that of only being a pretty gentlewoman, I concluded to send you a *spinning-wheel*, which I hope you will accept as a small token of my sincere love and affection. Sister, farewell, and remember that modesty, as it makes the most homely virgin amiable and charming, so the want of it infallibly renders the most perfect beauty disagreeable and odious. But when that brightest of female virtues shines among other perfections of body and mind, in the same person, it makes the woman more lovely than an angel. Excuse this freedom and use the same with me. I am, dear Jenny,

“Your loving brother,

“B. FRANKLIN.”

Compare Franklin's sentiments emphasized still further in Poor Richard's Almanac: —

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" Old England's Laws the proudest Beauty name
When single Spinster, and when married Dame,
For Housewifery is Woman's noblest Fame.
The wisest household Cares to Women yield
A large, an useful and a grateful Field."

Fancy the horror which would congeal
the soul of Poor Richard to-day at the
sight of woman stepping boldly outside that
"large Field" of the kitchen and spinning-
room! In the eyes of both Greek and
American, the woman plying spindle and
distaff was more nobly and graciously em-
ployed than the spoiled beauty gossiping
over the teacups, for, says Richard, —

" Many estates are spoiled in the getting,
Since women for tea forsook spinning and knitting."

Nor should we forget the august Fates
themselves, who spin the thread of human
destiny, weaving it into the web of universal
life, and cutting here and there a thread as
each mortal fulfils his allotted hour, —

" And sing to those who hold the vital shears,
And turn the adamantine spindle round,
On which the fate of gods and men is wound."

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Here we see the spindle as the emblem of human destiny, and always in the hands of women. Witness the three Norns, likewise, of our own northern ancestors, who sit around the tree *Igdrasil* and spin out the world's life on their whirring spindle.

If we ask more we need only turn to *Homer*, the inimitable reflector of the customs of his day. In his verse the spinner lives again, as she spins the fine white linen and gorgeous colored wool. Beautiful are the pictures she weaves into the cloth, stories of gods and demi-gods and heroes. *Odysseus*, entering the feasting hall of the *Phæacians*, is transfixed with wonder at its splendor; its seats, throughout all their length, were spread with the marvellous work of the *Phæacian* maidens, showing radiant in the torchlight, for the *Phæacian* women far exceeded all others in this household art. Did not the *Phæacian* queen recognize on *Odysseus* the very garments she herself and her maidens had made? And all the while loyal-hearted *Penelope* sat at home and wove her web to keep off suitors, not to catch them, though *Shake-*

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speare rather sneeringly remarks that "all the yarn she spun in Ulysses' absence did but fill Ithaca full of moths." Evidently spinning and the making of the household garments were not beneath the dignity of royal fingers in those old Greek days. Queenly indeed were these occupations, and right royal these distaffs of ivory and gold, the gifts of kings and poets, the symbols of woman's dominion. Was not the wool basket even of Helen of Troy lipped with gold? And in the excavations on the site of Troy to-day are found innumerable spindle-whorls of terra-cotta; and in the later excavations Dr. Schliemann found, twenty-eight feet below the surface in the Royal Mansion, a distaff eleven inches long to which a quantity of blackened woollen thread was still adhering. In those days of war and pillage the garments a man wore were the best tokens of his identity; the handiwork of the matron and her daughters was an individual seal set, as it were, upon the lives of their male relatives; home-made and home-spun were their garments, not turned out by the dozen, ready-made from a factory.

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Penelope sees through the wiles of the false Odysseus when he describes the garments she had made for the real one. This custom of the matron weaving the household cloth has thus given the Greek poets a favorite means of recognition of lost relatives which is certainly more poetic than the worn-out device of the "strawberry-mark" on the "long-lost brother." Even the water nymphs practise weaving; Circe also, and Calypso; mortals and immortals; yea, the mighty Hercules himself threw down his club and spun for love of Omphale: thus do Greek mythology and literature reflect the importance of spindle and distaff in the home-life of the Greeks, who, as we have learned, recognized the value and the dignity of woman's labor in believing it to be under the particular tutelage and protection of the dread daughter of Zeus.

The Romans copied the Greeks in this as in many other things. They borrowed the spinster-goddess outright and called her Minerva to hide the plagiarism. Our friend Poor Richard says:

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“ When great Augustus ruled the World and Rome,
The Cloth he wore was spun and wove at Home,
His EMPRESS ply'd the Distaff and the Loom.”

Richard is borne out by another authority, who states that “Cæsar Augustus wore clothes made by his wife or daughter.” The hapless Lucretia, wife of Collatinus, Tarquin's nephew, and Consul of Rome in 509 B. C., “was found spinning when her husband visited her from the camp.” Gracious pictures these, of haughty Roman matrons, wives of consuls and emperors, spinning and weaving their husbands' togas. It is not often that we get such cosy and homelike thoughts of Rome, whose very name recalls naught but flashing legions and the clash of swords on brass.

And the women of the north, where the family was the unit of society and the village was a cluster of homesteads knit together by the ties of kindred—was the spinning-wheel heard in this land of our own ancestors? In the poetic diction of the Norsemen, with its expressive double substantives, we find that the maiden is

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called the "linen-folded," that is, she who is clothed or draped in linen. In the saga called "Gunnlaug the Worm-tongue," it is written :

"Dead in mine arms she droopeth,
My dear one, gold-ring's bearer ;
For God hath changed the life-days
Of this lady of the linen."

She who was folded in linen was the maker of that linen ; and the beautiful flowing draperies of Norse and Saxon women and the tunics of the men are as true witnesses to their homely occupations as the drapery of the Greeks. Was it not the doom of the warrior maiden Brynhild, the disobedient Valkyr, to become a woman and sit by the fire and spin ? For the rough nature of the North revolted from feminine occupations, and this warrior daughter of Wotan saw in spinning only deep humiliation and disgrace. Thus the ancient northern literature is also full of pictures of the women spinning their household linen, spinning their wedding linen, spinning the linen of husbands and sons. Noble ladies in the halls of earl

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and thane, wives in the lowlier homes of simple freemen, and in the cots of peasant and thrall — they all spun and wove for the needs of the home. What music-lover can ever forget Wagner's picture of the northern maids of later days assembled in a spinning-*bee* to spin the wedding linen for one of their number? The merry hum of the wheels so exquisitely copied by orchestra and chorus, interrupted now and then by Senta's plaintive song of the supernatural lover who has drawn her thoughts away from her betrothed, — surely this spinning-chorus from the "Flying Dutchman" will live as long as music lives, and will remain a representative instance of this beautiful northern custom.

Again, in the rush-strown hall of mediæval knight or baron hung with tapestry, the work of his lady and her dependants, depicting his deeds and those of his ancestors, we read the same tale of the spinning-wheel and distaff with its allied arts of weaving and embroidery.

Nay, did she not write history, too, this noble spinster, with her spindle and loom,

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"Who, as she plied the distaff,
In a sweet voice and low,
Still sang of noble houses,
And fights fought long ago"?

As Helen embroidered the combats of
Greeks and Trojans, so now, two thousand
years later, Queen Ma-
tilda and her maidens
are seen spinning and
weaving the Norman
Conquest of England
into the Bayeux Tapes-
try. Surely the muse



Troops for the invasion of England, from
the Bayeux Tapestry.

Clio might wield spin-
dle as well as stylus
as a symbol of her
patronage of history. It was no shame to
those high-born women to ply the distaff
and figure in the songs of chivalry as the
makers of all manner of household fabrics.

"My love to fight the Saxon goes,
And bravely shines his sword of steel ;
A heron's feather decks his brows,
And a spur on either heel ;

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His steed is blacker than a sloe,
And fleetier than the falling star ;
Amid the surging ranks he'll go
And shout for joy of war.

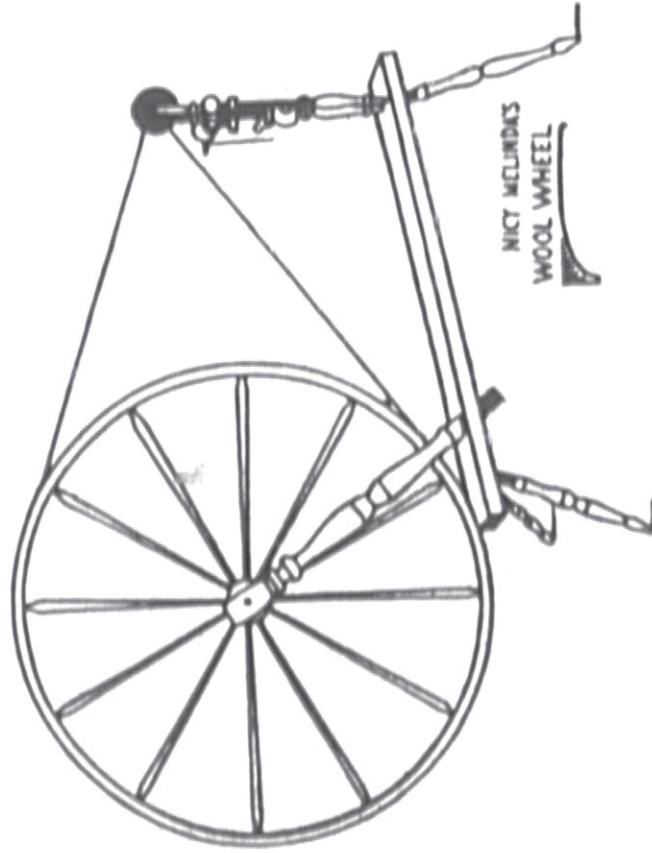
"Twinkle, twinkle, pretty spindle,
Let the white wool drift and dwindle ;
Oh ! we weave a damask doublet
For my love's coat of steel.
Hark ! the timid turning treadle
Crooning soft old-fashioned ditties,
To the low, slow murmur of the
Brown, round wheel."

So sang an Irish maid of long ago, and to-day we still look to Ireland for some of the finest spinning and weaving in existence.

It would be trite to refer to Margaret, dreaming of Faust over her spinning, were she not eminently typical. What maiden of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries did not sit in the garden idly spinning her allotted tasks while her thoughts were far away? It is a picture based on fact, as all great literary pictures are.

But our own immediate foremothers beckon us, and we must linger no longer

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in ancient times and foreign lands. What have the spinning-wheels here to tell us, as they lie gathering the dust of a century in some old musty garret — though an irate New England house-wife might declare that not even the dust of a week ever gathered in her garret — or are brought down to the “best parlor,” where they stand in honorable retirement tied up with ribbon? We know that at least every other one of them must have “come over” in the Mayflower, else how could so many yarns have been spun regarding the capacity of our ancestral ship? Here is a wool-wheel¹ (see illustration), not so old as many others, perhaps, but all the more interesting for that, inasmuch as it proves how recently the real old homespun held its place amongst us. This wheel is a little out of the common. It was made by one William Hopkins, a resident of Litchfield, for his daughter, Nicy Melinda, about 1825. William Hopkins was a direct descendant of Joseph Harris, one of Litchfield’s pioneers, who fell a victim to the tomahawk

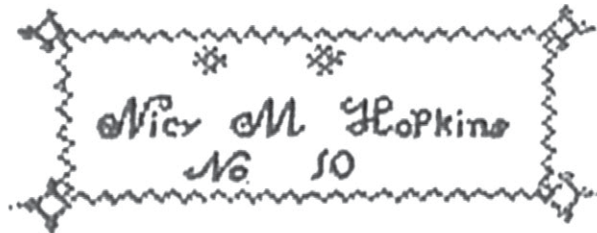
¹ Owned by the Litchfield Historical Society.

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on Harris Plains in 1723. He had married Mary Hopkins of West Hartford, and lived just below the Symington Cottage. His daughter Abigail married a cousin Asa Hopkins, and their son Harris married Margaret Peck, sister of Paul Peck, "the mighty hunter," and became the father of William Hopkins of the spinning-wheel. William was a clever mechanic, and made this wheel to suit Nicy's particular fancy. It has two heads instead of one, — a new and an old fashioned one, — and the edge of the wheel is narrow and has a little groove in it instead of being broad and flat. Nicy Melinda married John A. Woodruff, and lived on a farm this side of the Town-house first; then they sold out there and came into Litchfield, where they took up a residence on West Street. She died in 1868. She was Woodruff's second wife, and her step-daughter, Mrs. Abbie M. Woodruff Newcomb, has loaned to the Litchfield Historical Society a collection of linen spun and woven by her. It consists of sheets, pillow-slips, as they were called, and table-cloths; and there is also a red broad-

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cloth cloak entirely home-made. Her reel is also still in existence, and has been presented to this Society. The illustration shows the marking on the linen worked by her in black sewing-silk, the fine threads being counted at every stitch. Think of



the labor represented by every inch of this linen, whose sheen is hardly surpassed by the finest silk or satin, made on a lonely Connecticut farm by a busy woman, for whom it was only one of innumerable other tasks. Perhaps we had best pause here to outline this process of linen manufacture, that we may the better understand what the work of women like Nicy Melinda meant to our country in her time, but more particularly in the earlier times of the colonies and the Revolution. In speaking of the

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patriotic devotion of the men in our war for independence, of their bravery in battle, their dignity and wisdom in the council-hall, their patient endurance of every hardship and privation, we must not forget that their ability to meet these demands and to be what they were, was due to the independence of their homes of every outside help in supplying the necessaries of life, and this independence was due solely to the patient industry, the unceasing and voluminous manual labor of our grandmothers from their earliest childhood to their death. Every home farm supplied its own food and drink, medicine, fuel, lighting, clothing, and shelter. The very term "linen" as employed by our ancestors, meant the home-made article, "holland" always signifying that which was imported. Almost every article, in short, of household use and consumption was home-made, and home-made by the women. Women's hands made all the supplies of soap and candles; they distilled all the medicines from the herbs of the field; they stocked the larder with pies and pickles, jams and jellies and preserves;

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they brewed the mead and metheglin, and all other household drinks; they churned the butter and made the cheese; they ran bullets, as we very well know in Litchfield, where the leaden statue of George III., torn down from the Bowling Green, New York, and hurried thither, was melted by Litchfield's patriot women in the back orchard of Oliver Wolcott; and lastly, they spun into thread and yarn the flax and wool that was raised on the farm, and then knitted every pair of stockings and mittens, wove every inch of linen and woolen cloth, and cut and made every stitch of clothing worn by a family which generally numbered ten or a dozen Johns and Hezekiahs and Josiahs and Hepzibahs and Mehitable Anna. No wonder a man could go to the war for his country's independence, when he left Independence herself at home in the person of his wife.

No properly brought up maiden of those days would think herself prepared to marry until she had collected in her "linen-chest" all the necessaries of housekeeping spun, and often woven, by herself, besides all

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things necessary to complete her trousseau. Ten pairs of linen sheets at least she must have, and she must "knit a pillow-slip full of stockings" before she could even think of the happy event. Thus the time of a young girl was largely used in spinning her own wedding outfit, — whether rich or poor, it made no difference. The wealthiest spun with the poorest, and you will find the spinning-wheel of both kinds in the musty old inventories of estates of every value, and in the "setting-out" of every bride, whether she left a farmer's lonely homestead, or the proud colonial mansion of the well-to-do; the millionaire was an unknown species then.

Let us now see how much work there was in this spinning, which was only one of those numberless other things our grandmothers had to do.

Flax was sown in May, and when the plants were three or four inches high, they were weeded by the women and children, walking barefoot on account of the tender stalks. At the end of June, or in July, it was pulled up very carefully by the roots



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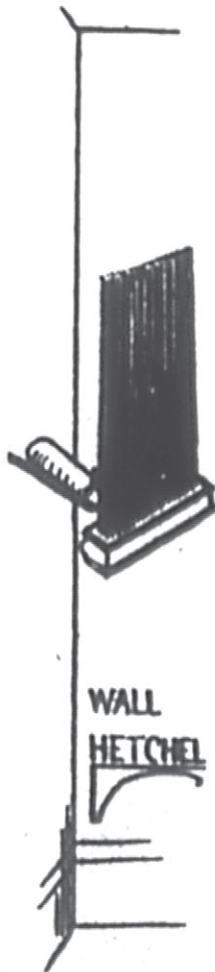
by men and boys and laid out to dry, being turned several times in the sun: this operation was called "pulling and spreading." Then came the "rippling," a process by which the stalks of flax were drawn with a quick stroke through an iron wire comb



with coarse teeth: this broke off the seed-bolls, which were caught in a sheet and saved for the next year's crop. The flax was still in the field, where it was now tied in bundles, called "beats" or "bates," and stacked in a tent-shaped stack called a "stook." When the stacks were dry they were again treated with water to rot the leaves. This was called "retting;" the bates of flax were piled in running water in a solid heap, and left for about five days, when they were taken up and the rotting leaves removed. When cleaned and dried

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the flax was once more tied in bundles. It was then broken by men on the great flax-brake in order to separate the fibres and get out from the centre the hard, woody "hexe" or "bun." This clumsy instrument need not be described here, further than to say that a heavy beam set with slats, hinged to an under beam also set with slats corresponding to the intervals of the upper one, was weighted and allowed to fall on the flax laid in between. The flax was usually broken twice, then "scutched" or "swingled" with a swingling block and knife to remove any remaining bits of bark. The clean fibres were then made into bundles called "strikes," which were swingled again, the refuse from the process being used for coarse bagging. The "strikes" were sometimes "beetled," or pounded in a wooden trough over and over until soft. The flax was now ready for the process of hackling or hetcheling, which required great dexterity on the part of the hetcheler. The flax fibres were carefully drawn towards the hetcheler through the teeth of the hetchel (see illustrations, pages



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33 and 34, taken from originals in the Litchfield Historical Society), thus pulling out the fibres into long continuous threads and combing out the shorter threads. This implement has given its name to that process of "heckling" so familiar, for instance, to hen-pecked husbands when lectured by irate wives. Our inelegant but expressive modern slang would say she "combed him down." These are the "combs" she would use, figuratively at least, if not actually.

After the first hackle, six other finer ones were frequently applied, and the amount of good fibre left after all this hackling, even from a huge mass of raw material, was very small; but a very large quantity of linen thread could be spun from this small amount. The fibres were then sorted according to fineness by a process called "reading and drawing." Now at last the flax was ready for the wheel, and was wrapped around the dis-

35



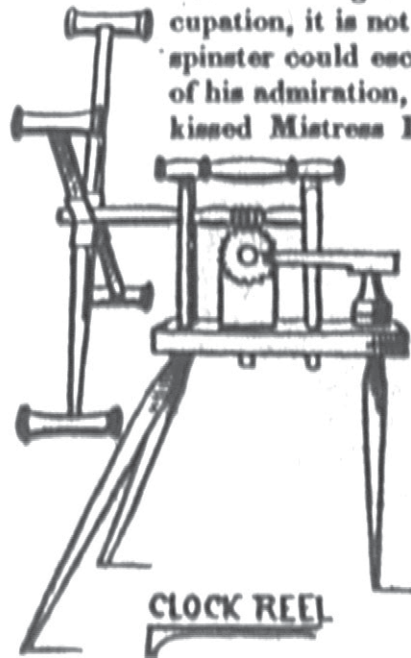
Woman with hetchel
15th century

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taff; the spinner seated herself at this familiar implement and spun out a long, even thread from the mass of fibre on the distaff. This thread she wound on bobbins as she spun it, and when the bobbins were full, she wound it off on a reel into knots and skeins. This was the clock-reel, which ticked when a certain number of strands had been wound in a "knot"; then the spinner would pause and tie the knot, and if at that moment some ardent admirer were watching this pretty and graceful occupation, it is not at all likely that the busy spinster could escape a more tangible proof of his admiration, for it is written that "He kissed Mistress Polly when the clock-reel ticked."

Doubtless John Alden improved his opportunities when he was told to speak for himself; at least, let us hope that Priscilla did not have to hint about everything.

It was a good day's work to spin two skeins



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of twenty knots each, every knot having usually forty threads. For this work a woman earned eight cents a day and her keep. In the valley of Wyoming, where so many Connecticut families emigrated to meet their terrible doom later on at the hands of the Indians, a woman was paid six shillings a week for her labor at spinning.

Before the threads could be woven they had still to pass through a long and laborious process of bleaching by soaking them in many waters, then with hot water and ashes over and over again, then in clear water again for a week, then a final seething, rinsing, beating, washing, drying, and winding on bobbins, when they were at last ready for the loom.

Such was the far from simple process of flax-culture and spinning on the farm: when we remember that wool culture and spinning was scarcely less laborious, and that the home weaving of both kinds of thread has not yet been taken into the account, we shall begin to realize what it meant to the women of '76 when they voluntarily took oath to wear naught but

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homespun, they and their sons and their daughters.

But there was much social enjoyment in it too, and much interest excited by the offering of prizes to efficient and rapid spinners. It was not unusual for a woman in those days to tuck her baby under one arm, tie her wheel behind her, and trot off on horseback to spend the day in spinning with a neighbor. Many a well-to-do matron "had a touch so skilful that she could spin two threads, one in each hand, while she kept the treadle of her flax-wheel moving with her foot, held the baby asleep across her knees, and talked with her visitors." Or, when weather permitted, "the wide hospitable door would be thrown open, and the thrifty house-wife in afternoon dress of mull or 'taffety' and a fine cambric apron, would step back and forth before the great wool-wheel set in the space-way spinning fine yarn while neighbors dropped in."

Speaking of two-handed wheels, I find the following quaint advertisement in the Hartford "Courant" for January 5, 1801:—

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"ALL kinds of SPINNING WHEELS and REELS made and repaired by JOEL BALDWIN of Bristol living on the road from Cambridge Meeting-House to Farmington.

"*N. B.* Two handed wheels are highly recommended to young Women, as they can spin one third faster on them.

"BRISTOL, Dec. 15."

And then the spinning-bees and spinning classes — the sewing circles of those days. Both Connecticut and Massachusetts as early as 1640 took legal steps to encourage the culture and spinning of flax, and every family was ordered to spin a certain amount of flax a year on penalty of a fine, and often prizes were offered for quantity and quality. On Boston Common the spinsters would sometimes meet with their wheels, and sit them down to spin — rich and poor alike, to the number, once, of three hundred. Think you the haughty spinsters of Boston would do the like to-day? On one occasion they were preached to by the minister in a long and profitable sermon, and a collection of \$453 was taken up. This most edifying event took place in 1754.

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Sermons and spinning evidently went hand in hand, for I find in the Litchfield "Monitor" for May 16, 1798, the following item of news:—

"SOUTH FARMS, May 7.

"On Wednesday, the 2d instant visited at the house of the Rev. Amos Chase, about 60 of his female friends parishioners:— Who made the very acceptable presentation of seventy run of Yarn to his family. In the course of the decent and cordial socialties of the afternoon, the ladies were entertained by their Pastor with a sermon adapted to the occasion,—from these words, Gen. xxxi. 43, "*What can I do, this day, unto these my daughters?*"

From an address by the Rev. Grant Powers on the occasion of the centennial anniversary of the town of Goshen, Connecticut, in 1838, I quote the following account of a great spinning-match among the ladies about 1772:—

"There arose a *spinning-match*, among the young married ladies, at the house of Nehemiah Lewis. . . . The trial was at the

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foot-wheel in spinning linen. The conditions were previously defined and agreed to, viz. : They might spin during the whole twenty-four hours if they chose. They were to have their distaffs prepared for them, and their yarn reeled by others. Upon the first trial at Lews' house many did well. The wife of Stephen Tuttle spun five runs, which were equal to two and a half days' labour when on hire. Several others spun four runs each ; but Mrs. Tuttle came off victor. But this aroused the ambition of some of the unmarried ladies, and Lydia Beach, the daughter of Dea. Edmund Beach, of East-street, was the first to come forward and take up the gauntlet. She spun from early dawn to nine o'clock in the evening. She had her distaffs prepared, her yarn reeled, and her food put into her mouth. She spun in this time seven runs, three and a half days' labour, and took the wreath from the brow of Mrs. Tuttle."

Mr. Powers adds in a foot-note,

"Some of our Matrons say that ten runs were a week's labour ; if so Miss Lydia performed the labour of four days and one-fifth of a day in one day."

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“Upon hearing of the exploit of Miss Beach [he continues in his address] the wife of Capt. Isaac Pratt, of the South part of the town, came upon the arena. Between early dawn and the setting of the sun, she had actually spun six runs, but at this moment her husband interfered, and peremptorily forbade her proceeding further. She sat down, and wept like a child, when she ought to have rejoiced, that she possessed a husband, in whose eyes her future health and happiness were more precious, than the brief applause which might arise from success in that contest.”

He goes on to say that Lydia Beach became the wife of Jesse Buel, son of Capt. Jonathan Buel, “while her garland was yet fresh upon her brow; but the doating husband was destined to see it wither down to the grave, for Lydia never enjoyed health from the hour of her triumph.”

From this it is evident that the spinning-wheel as well as the sewing-machine has had its victims. It was well for these toiling women of the pioneer towns if they had husbands thoughtful enough to stop in time the self-sacrifice of daily labor at the wheel,

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as well as in this spinning-match for glory only. Of such pious women Chaucer could scarcely have said : —

“Deceite, weepyng, spynnyng, God hath give
To wymmen kyndely that they may live.”

For not only did these women live, but also their families and their country because of their spinning.

The Stamp Act year was drawing on, and the storm of indignation was beginning to rumble in the distance, soon to burst like a tornado on England's commerce with her colonies. From Massachusetts to South Carolina the colonies were alive with patriotic societies of women called “Daughters of Liberty,” who banded themselves together with the agreement to drink no tea, and wear only what their own hands could spin and weave. Among the Daughters of Stratford, Connecticut, were two children of a Tory father, of the elder of whom it is written, “that having lost her thimble she would not buy another, as it would be an imported article ; and Polly, the little sister, scorning an English needle, learned to sew

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with a thorn." Think of that, all ye modern women to whom sewing is enough of a "thorn" in itself without using another to sew with.

Everywhere these Daughters met together to spin, once to the number of seventy in one place. In Rowley, Massachusetts, "thirty-three respectable ladies," as the story runs, "met at sunrise with their wheels to spend the day at the house of the Reverend Jedediah Jewell, in the laudable design of a spinning-match." Of course the Rev. Jedediah preached to them; but they were also given bodily sustenance in the form of a "polite and generous repast." All honor to these Daughters of the olden time whose spinning-wheels did surely spin out their country's glorious destiny! "Queens of Homespun," Horace Bushnell called such women, "out of whom we draw our royal lineage." And today, another patriotic society of forty thousand modern Daughters, their descendants, have surely honored themselves in choosing for their insignia this very spinning-wheel and distaff, this symbol of their grand-

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mother's toil and self-sacrifice and patriotism ; for in that little emblem are embodied all the blood and tears, the sorrow, the rejoicing, and the patient, steadfast labor of the women of the American Revolution. The Rev. Mr. Powers in his centennial address, after eulogizing the men, thus speaks of these patriot women of our land : —

“ Nor do we speak of these *men* only, but their *mothers*, their *wives* and their *daughters* were like them. . . . They sustained their full share in all the trials and dangers of the Ocean, of the wilderness, and of war ! Their courage in times of peril, and their fortitude in trials never forsook them ! They gave up their husbands and their sons for the cause of God and their country, and their example was all powerful. And this was true, not only of *Pilgrim* women, but of women in the Revolution. This town possessed them. I will give one instance of this that it may be a memorial of her. Abraham Parmele was a warm patriot in the Revolution . . . but in this it is said, he was thrown into the shade by the patriotism of his wife Mary

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Stanley that was. She was fixed in the righteousness of the cause of the colonies, and when war broke out, she said they would prevail! She said she could pray for the cause of America; and not in the darkest period of the conflict, when many faces were pale, and many hands were on their loins, did this woman's confidence fail her in the least, — and her actions corresponded with her words. Four different times did she fit out her own son Theodore for the battlefield, and gave him her parting blessing; and with her own hands did she make five soldiers' blankets, not to sell, but sent them a present to the poor soldiers, who, after the battles of the day, had neither bed nor covering for the night. Could soldiers thus sustained ever relinquish the cause of their country? Never!"

In Townsend, Massachusetts, it is said that "a devoted mother and her daughters did in a day and a night shear a black and a white sheep, card from the fleece a gray wool, spin, weave, cut, and make a suit of clothes for the boy whom they were sending off to fight for liberty." W. J. Stillman in his Autobiography tells of a similar instance

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occurring in the pastor's family in Newport, Rhode Island, in whose home his mother grew up. Coming from such homes as these, no wonder that the boys of '76 won that fight.

But New England was not alone in her encouragement of flax and wool culture. Virginia, where wild flax grew in profusion, was even earlier than Massachusetts in arousing an interest in flax-spinning. In 1646, two spinning-schools were established in Jamestown, and prizes were offered for the best work, until the whole colony was engaged in this home industry. Every great and little plantation had its spinning-house, where the female slaves were kept busily spinning, the mistress herself joining in the work. We are of course reminded of the spinning-house at Mount Vernon, where "Lady" Washington marshalled her dusky spinners. It is said that she ravelled and dyed her old silk gowns and silk scraps, and had them woven into chair-covers. Sometimes she did the reverse, weaving a dress for herself out of ravelled cushions and the General's old silk stockings.

Madame Pinckney, another dame of high

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degree, was actively instrumental in starting the flax industries of South Carolina.

The German settlers of Germantown were also great flax-growers, as attested by their town-seal, the device of their leader, Father Pastorius. And what we now know as



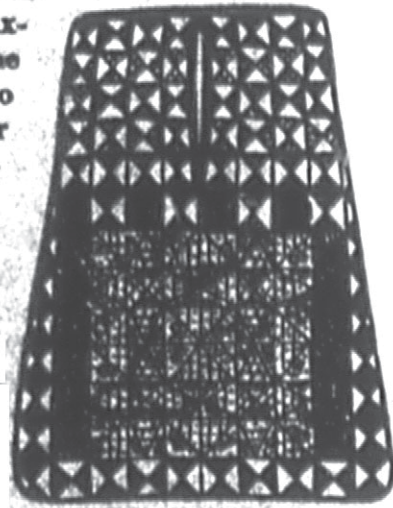
“Germantown” still testifies to their proficiency in the wool industries.

The wives and daughters of the Swedish colony, as early as 1673, employed themselves in spinning wool and flax, and many in weaving; and the excellence shown by the wool and flax workers of New York occasioned uneasiness in the mother-country, which rightly saw in it the possible independence of the colonies of all English cloth and clothing.

The production and manufacture of cotton was not taken up in this country until 1770.

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three years after the invention of the spinning-jenny by Hargreaves. Cotton, in the earliest times, was spun like flax, first on the hand-distaff, and then on a wheel like the flax-wheel. For some time after its introduction into this country, it was far more expensive, and considered more of a luxury, than linen. It was called by the East Indian name of "hum-hum." A work-pocket in the Litchfield Historical Society (see illustration) contains a piece of the first cotton cloth made in America. The pocket is large and was worn at the side, evidently to hold flax in while spinning, for some flax still remains in it. The growing and spinning of cotton cannot, however, be counted among the truly colonial industries.



PATCHWORK POCKET

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The Stamp Act soon stirred all patriotic Philadelphians to the resolve to eat no "meat of the mutton kind," — a resolve rendered still more stern in 1775. A wool-factory was fitted up, and, to quote Mrs. Alice Morse Earle,¹ "an appeal was made to the women to save the state. In a month four hundred wool-spinners were at work." In the same year the Provincial Congress made an appeal to the people for thirteen thousand warm coats for the Continental army, to be ready for the soldiers when winter came. It was a time when all preparations for the war seemed to be in the most hopeless snarl, and army supplies were scarce and often lacking. To-day a contractor would make nothing of the job, possibly in more senses than one; but a hundred years ago the wool-wheels and hand-looms were set humming by hundreds of hearth-stones, and, writes Mrs. Earle again, "the order was filled by the handiwork of patriotic American women. In the record book of some New England towns

¹ To whose charming book, *Home Life in Colonial Days*, I am indebted for many facts relating to colonial spinning.

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may still be found the list of the coat-makers. . . . Every soldier volunteering for eight months' service was given one of these homespun, homemade, all-wool coats as a bounty. So highly were these 'Bounty Coats' prized, that the heirs of soldiers who were killed at Bunker Hill before receiving their coats were given a sum of money instead. The list of names of soldiers who then enlisted is known to this day as the 'Coat Roll,' and the names of the women who made the coats might form another roll of honor. The English sneeringly called Washington's army the 'Homespuns.' They little knew the power and significance of that title. Well did Horace Bushnell call it "mother and daughter power."

Thus we see that in New England the culture, spinning and weaving of wool, as well as flax, was as religiously encouraged as in Pennsylvania, Virginia, and New York. The great wool-wheel was as necessary an implement in every household as the little flax-wheel, for every home had by law to contain one spinner. Children of all classes were required to learn to spin wool, and met

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on equal footing over their work. Homespun became so universal a commodity that imported woolens were not missed when the time came to forbid them the country. It was a process of many months of hard labor to convert the raw fleece into the "all-wool goods a yard wide" which we cut up so recklessly to-day. Another old saying, "dyed in the wool," represents another laborious process, that of dyeing the wool with homemade dyes. All kinds of homely flowers were used for these dyes, a beautiful green being made from goldenrod mixed with indigo. Blue, made from the blue paper that wrapped the old sugar-loaf, and from indigo bought from travelling pedlars, was the favorite color, possibly because the easiest to obtain; and the old blue dye-pot stood constantly in the chimney corner like the Frenchwoman's *pot-aufeu*. We cannot help wondering if the coats of the "Homespuns" were blue. And the familiar blue of the patriot army? Was that also women's work?

After the dyeing came the carding, a very deft process, and also a very dirty one, for

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the wool had first to be rubbed with melted swine's grease — three pounds of grease to ten of wool. This process corresponded in purpose and method to the hutcheling of flax, as the wool was drawn into parallel fibres through bent wire teeth set in a leather or wooden rectangle, called a wool-card. Here are the wool-cards of Maria Tallmadge, second wife of Colonel Benjamin Tallmadge, the famous major of Connecticut's Second Light Dragoons, the friend of Lafayette and confidant of Washington; they belong to the valuable collection of the Litchfield Historical Society. By these clumsy-looking implements the wool was twisted into little rolls, and was then ready for spinning.

This wool-spinning called for the most alert and graceful series of movements, to which our foremothers owe in large part their poise and dignity of carriage. The little roll of wool was placed on the spindle, the great wheel was given a quick turn, and the spinner stepped quickly backward three or four steps, holding the twisting yarn in her left hand high above her head: then with a



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quick forward movement she let it wind around the bobbin, and the process was repeated. An active spinner could spin six skeins a day, and to do this it is estimated that she walked with her backward and forward steps over twenty miles.

Yarn was wound from the spindle on clock-reels, and also on hand-reels called "niddy-noddies." To be knitted it had also to be washed and cleaned.

To spin the finest yarn was a much desired accomplishment among housewives, It is said that one Mistress Mary Prigge once spun a pound of wool into eighty-four thousand yards—that is, nearly forty-eight miles.

All these different manipulations lasted many months, though they could be accomplished in much shorter time; they also furnished occupation for an entire family, from the grandmother down to the children, when on long winter evenings they all assembled before the kitchen fire.

It is impossible here to go into the home process of weaving this wool and linen thread; but it was no less laborious than

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all that had gone before. Suffice it to say that in almost every house throughout New England, Pennsylvania, and Virginia the hand-loom was to be found, and every farmer's daughter could weave as well as spin, although weaving was not so wholly woman's work as was spinning. Homespun



linen after being woven had to undergo about forty processes of bleaching, as it was still light brown in color. It was often kept out on the grass for weeks at a time, until at least sixteen months had elapsed since the planting of the flaxseed to the final evolution of the finished sheet or pillow-case. What modern linen is as firm, solid, and close-woven, and capable of being used a hundred years hence as this can be used to-day? What needle-work so fine? One can hardly believe that the same hands which made the soap and greased the wool could hem like that, embroider the finest edging

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and other work, make bead-bags, and knit the daintiest lace. All-around women they must have been to pass back and forth from the coarsest to the finest labor, and to keep their minds alert as well. Listen to one Abigail Foote's diary, in the year 1775, and she a young girl: —

“Fix'd gown for Prude, — Mend Mother's Riding-hood, — Spun short thread, — Fix'd two gowns for Welsh's girls, — Carded tow, — Spun linen, — Worked on Cheese-basket, Hatchel'd flax with Hannah, we did 51 lbs. a-piece, — Pleated and ironed, — Read a sermon of Doddridge's, — Spooled a piece, — Milked the cows, — Spun linen, did 50 knots, — Made a Broom of Guinea-wheat straw, — Spun thread to whiten, — Set a Red dye, — Had two Scholars from Mrs. Taylor's, — I carded two pounds of whole wool and felt Nationly, — Spun harness twine, scoured the pewter.”

All this besides washing, cooking, weaving tape, knitting, weeding, picking geese, and making social visits. And yet we talk about modern rush and hurry, and the “strenuous life.” It is merely a change

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of occupation. We hear it constantly said of our ancestors' fine needle-work, delicate hand-writing, etc., "Oh, they had more time to do such things." Would not Abigail Foote dispute that, think you? Also



Mrs. John May, a prominent Boston woman, who writes in her diary for one day :

" A large kettle of yarn to attend upon. Lucretia and self rinse, scour through many waters, get out, dry, attend to, bring in, do up and sort 110 score of yarn; this with baking and ironing. Then went to hackling flax."

Now she was not an over-worked farmer's wife, but a city woman, the wife of a colonel. I do not believe they had one bit more time than we have. Manners and customs

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change, but this busy world was always busy, and it is true of all ages that "woman's work is never done." There are those who regret the disuse of these homely occupations, saying that the home has suffered with the modern broadening of "woman's sphere." They forget that a sphere must round itself out on all sides, leaving the centre at the same point: the rounding out of woman's sphere leaves her centre still the home. And the home still centres in the woman; the country still centres in the home, and no mere change of womanly occupation can alter God's fundamental law of human society. But for the comfort of those who would still see woman spinning as in the "good old times," it is worthy of note that in Deer Isle, Maine, the spinning-match is still extant. True to patriotic tradition, the wool-spinners there have formed a "Martha Washington Benevolent Society," which for fifty years, without a break, has held an annual spinning-match in August, twenty or more women assembling with their great wheels, and spinning with all the old-time dexterity. One of their

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number is one hundred and two years old, and during the past winter made, entirely without help, four large patch-work bed-quilts, double-bed size, and sold them at the sale which accompanies the match. The yarn which they spin through the year they knit into stockings and mittens for home use and for sale.

In New York City lives a family who are now developing these homely industries to their full artistic limits. One of the most interesting exhibits in the National Exposition of Children's Work held in March, 1901, was a portière entirely hand-made by the young son and daughter of Douglas Volk, the artist, in their city home. The wool was spun and dyed by Marian Volk with vegetable dyes of her own making, and the boy wove it on a genuine loom, one hundred years old, brought from the heart of Maine. The room in which they spin and weave, with its home-made rugs, antique chairs, and brass candlesticks, its spinning-wheels, clock-reel, and loom, all in daily use, might be taken for the "living-room" of an old Maine farmhouse. The

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artistic possibilities of the old spinning and weaving were recognized a few years ago by Mrs. Volk while living at Lovell, her summer home in Maine, and she has successfully established there her new industry of home rug-making, every process of which is marked with the sincerity of hand-work — a noble handicraft indeed. Thus this time-honored occupation still thrives in the East, while in the remote and mountainous regions in the South, handweaving and spinning are still household arts — as also in many foreign countries.

But here must end the tale of the spinning-wheel in many ages and climes, though the tale is not half told. We have seen the centuries bear witness to the dignity of woman's manual labor, of which the old dusty spinning-wheel is as glorious a symbol as are the tattered battle-flags a token of the soldier's hard-fought field. Patriotism, self-devotion, sacrifice — all speak to us from the one and from the other. Woman's labor has supported the home, has filled the breach in war-time, has clothed the world, and continues to do so to-day. For though

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the spinning-wheel is mute, the sewing-machine and the factory are not, and the "Song of the Shirt" goes on forever. The Daughters of Liberty spun for their country in the days of '76, and they have lived again in every period of their country's need — in the Sanitary Commission, in the women's Red Cross Auxiliaries, in the "Dames" and "Daughters" of to-day. Let us thank God that we had such foremothers; thank Him that they and the forefathers gave us a country of which we may still be proud; thank Him that their spirit is still alive in our midst, for as the uprising of that spirit drove the tyrant from our shores in 1776, so it has ever since arisen, and still will rise to deliver our country from the perils of the hour — the peril from the greedy and corrupt politician, the perils of popular ignorance and luke-warm patriotism, and all other perils consequent upon the loss of our forefathers' ideals. May this spirit never die, for the day of its disappearance is the day of our country's doom. It is the duty and the privilege of our great Society to see that "old New England" never fails us.

TALE OF THE SPINNING-WHEEL

for it is her spirit that has burned high in the breast of American womanhood from Bunker Hill till now, and there stands its witness. Honor the old spinning-wheel and all it signifies, and to the spinster :

“ Give her of the fruit of her hands ;
and let her works praise her in the gates.”

