

The Kiss of Death Story

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A PERSON of an historical turn of mind living in the Merrimack Valley can hardly escape becoming interested in the early days of the textile industry which once flourished here. Among the fascinating details bound to come to his attention is the story of the "kiss of death" shuttle.

Historians have been unable to place the date of the earliest use of shuttles in weaving; some time in the Middle Ages is as close as they dare to come. But it is known that ever since then a boat-shaped object called a shuttle has been used to carry the weft thread across the loom in the process of weaving cloth. This shuttle contained a hollow space for holding the spool of weft thread and a hole or "eye" through which the loose end of the thread emerged. (See Fig. 1a.) Old books say that the weaver, in reloading his shuttle, "draws the loose end through the hole with his breath."²

No one could object to this unsanitary habit so long as weaving took place only in the weaver's home. Even later on, when professional weavers were brought together in "manufactories" and later still in the weave rooms of textile mills (Fig. 1b), no one saw reason to object. Certainly no one connected this habit with the observation, made sometime in the nineteenth century, that weavers were dying of what was then called consumption at a higher rate than was the general public.

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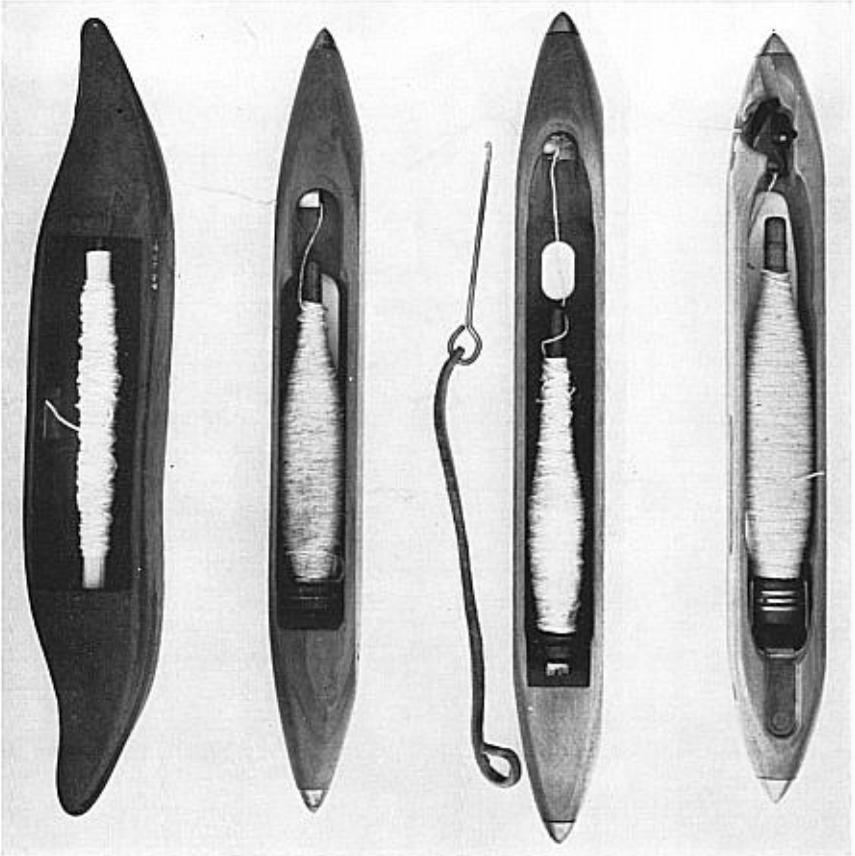
² William S. Murphy, "The Textile Industries." London, 1911. Vol. IV, 120. The weaver . . . "leads the loose thread along to the hole, and draws it through with his breath."

In 1882 the German bacteriologist Robert Koch succeeded in isolating the tubercle bacillus from the sputum of consumptive patients. Pasteur had already advanced the germ theory of disease. In 1895 Roentgen discovered the X-ray, and it soon became possible to demonstrate the diseased lungs of patients whose sputum contained tubercle bacilli. Tuberculosis became known as "the Great White Plague." Popular campaigns complete with exhibits were staged against it by Public Health agencies, even in small towns. I must have been about seven when I was taken to one of these. I was so scared that for several nights I slept on a board with my head outside the window, much to the distress of my parents.

At about this time observers remembered about the weavers' habit of sucking the thread end through the shuttle and realized that by contaminating a number of shuttles a single tuberculous weaver could infect a whole weave room. Owners and superintendents of textile mills quickly made rules against the old practice of sucking through. As might be expected, they were largely ignored and the "good old way" prevailed.

In some mills each weaver was provided with a small metal hook (see Fig. 1c) with which to pull the weft end through the shuttle eye. Weavers still preferred the "good old way." Massachusetts passed Chapter 281 of the Acts of 1911 making the use of the kiss of death shuttle unlawful.³ One of the at-

³ Commonwealth of Massachusetts, Manual of the Labor Laws, June, 1915, page 68. Suction Shuttles. Acts of 1911, Chapter 281. Suction Shuttles. Section 1. It shall be unlawful for any proprietor of a factory or any officer or



FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: FIG. 1A, 1B, 1C, 1D, 1E

tempts to conform to this law was the production of shuttles having a small bunch of woolen yarn at the inner end of the eye (see Fig. 1d) so that sucking

agent or other person to require or permit the use of suction shuttles, or any form of shuttle in the use of which any part of the shuttle or any thread is put in the mouth or touched by the lips of the operator. It shall be the duty of the state board of labor and industries to enforce the provisions of this act. Section 2. Violations of this act shall be punished by a fine of not less than fifty dollars for each offense.

through was impossible—unless the weaver first scraped out the offending obstruction.

It was not until the introduction of the self-threading shuttle (see Fig. 1e) that the problem was finally solved. Modern looms now reload the empty shuttle automatically, and modern shuttles rethread themselves. The “Kiss of Death” shuttle has had its day. Now it may take its place with the vast company of solved problems which mark the progress of textile history from the earliest times.