



## Another



### The Glass Blowers of Scotch Plains

Robert Howell and his wife can work anywhere. They are glass blowers and they understand the tools of their craft. They have trekked across the continent twice, instructing teachers, scholars, showmen and curators in every state in the Union, in the art of making the most delicate ornaments, vases, tapestries and laces from pieces of glass tubing. Take a seat opposite them at the long table in the basement of their house in Scotch Plains and observe the ease and dexterity with which they heat the tube under gas jets, section by section, and shape it to the desired pattern by blowing through it when it becomes plastic. Presto! What was once a curious assortment of bulbous gadgets, of curves, hooks and nodules is deftly welded, piece by piece, into a sparkling basket of flowers, a silver sail boat, a galloping antelope, a strutting pelican; or, if you prefer something less aesthetic but no less artistic, a monkey, owl or a hobgoblin.

Robert Howell is long practiced in this ancient art. Born out there where the tall corn grows, he spent his boyhood chasing hares and dreaming dreams of a wonder world on the other side of a Kansas prairie. More than half a century has passed since his visit to the State Fair where he saw a walking-beam engine made entirely of glass and run by steam. This novel contrivance so captured his imagination that he gave up the idea of being a railroad engineer and determined to be a glass blower. After an apprenticeship with a Frenchman who came to this country in 1876 and a year as assistant foreman in a glass factory, he joined the caravan of itinerant showmen, westward bound. While exhibiting at the St. Louis Exposition, he met the girl of his choice, taught her his craft, and as their children matured—two boys and two girls—they were taken into the partnership. Thereafter, until the children were married, the Howell family was on tour. Recently Howell senior startled such sophisticated Rotarians as Bob Snevily, Frank Betz, Paul Prentiss, Henry Viswat and

Al Buist with eerie feats of bubble magic.

The studious Mr. Howell says glass making probably originated in Egypt about 500 B. C. Alexander the Great is said to have been buried in a glass casket made by artisans of the Nile Valley. Julius Caesar introduced the craft into Rome upon his triumphant return from a visit with his girl friend, Cleopatra. During the Renaissance it became a monopoly in Venice and the death penalty was imposed upon the worker who revealed the secret of its manufacture. However, shrewd Bohemian priests, visiting Venice as emissaries of good will, prevailed upon some of the more skillful workers to return with them and not long thereafter three-fourths of the trade was in the hands of the painstaking and acquisitive Germans of the Sudeten land. These simple peasant folk wrought skillfully. Their pay was meager; the shrewd jobber was their master. He visited them annually and bought the output of a year's work for a sum equivalent to about \$1.50 per day, per family. Yet there were compensations. They had their little gardens, some chickens, a goat; their wants were few and easily satisfied. They sang as they worked at their benches—; and they were happy; they believed in fairies.

The craft promised well in this country as long as there were Indians around to buy glass trinkets manufactured for their edification by Jamestown settlers. A string of glass beads would buy a thousand acres of Virginia land. Today, the finer glassware sold to tourists in that state was made abroad. And Mr. Howell believes it will always be so. In America, glass making is an industry. The aim of the manufacturer is large scale production, at low cost, for world markets; and, incidentally, the manufacturer has machines ready to turn out glassware which only the connoisseur can distinguish from the hand-made product. Like the glass blowers of the Sudeten land, the Howells belong to the old order; they are specialists who work with their hands. And when their hands have lost their cunning their work will cease.