

TALES OF WHITTLEBURY FOREST

NUMBER FIVE

LACE-MAKING.

FIFTY or sixty years ago it was a common sight on a summer's evening in our villages, to see the women in their black dresses and white aprons sitting outside their cottage-doors, working busily at their lace pillows.¹ Now the craft has almost completely disappeared, but even then it was a dying industry, partly kept alive by the efforts of charitable ladies who privately, or through Lace Associations, would organise the buying of lace from the makers and its sale to more or less wealthy clients. Mrs. John Butler Harrison, wife of the Rector of Paulerspury, and Mrs. Chettle of Potterspury, whose husband farmed on the Duke of Grafton's estate, were very active in their own neighbourhood, while Mrs. de Bless of Great Billing and Miss Phyllis Wake of Courteenhall (as she then was), kept the craft alive in Hackleton, Horton and Piddington for several years down to 1914. The Midland Lace Association worked on a larger scale in the area round Northampton, and came to an end at about the same time, largely, I was given to understand, through some desperate friction between the ladies who ran it, though what was at the bottom of the trouble I never heard.

In 1935, Mr. Frost wrote the following account of lace-making in Paulerspury at the turn of the century :—

“ One of the industries of the village I must not omit to mention is the making of pillow lace. Paulerspury has always been justly celebrated for its lace-making. Years gone by it was much more widely made than it is today. It was most interesting to see a group of them at work at night. There would be the candle-stool in the centre of a group, this stool had wooden sockets set in holes, in each socket a globular glass filled with water and a candle or rushlight in the centre. These glasses focussed the light on the pillow.

Some of the laces made were most lovely. I have seen some of them with as many as four hundred bobbins on their pillow ; all the spare ones not wanted at the time were tied up in bundles till wanted. It seems wonderful how they knew when they were wanted. All sorts of lovely things were made, panels for ladies' dresses, embroidery for altar hangings, and other things too numerous to remember. Lace is still made, but in a small way in comparison to what it was thirty years ago. Most of the skilled workers of that time have gone.”

Pillow lace always used to form one of the largest classes of exhibits at the Northamptonshire Home Arts and Industries Association exhibition, held annually by turns at Northampton, Daventry, Towcester, Kettering and Wellingborough, down to about 1910, and very lovely it was in the recollection of the present writer. Mr. Frost's account is supplemented by Mrs. Friday of Syresham, writing at about the same time.

“ Pillow lace making was a good trade [at Syresham] and many men worked at it with the women at home ; as the agricultural wage was very low, they could earn more at lace-making. A man with the name of Somerton was the last man in the village to give up making lace.

Children were taught the art as early as six years of age. At seven years of age a girl named Whitlock was set down to her day's work and was not allowed any time to herself till she had finished it. There were several lace schools and old Bet at one of

1. See p. 30.

them was very strict, but to those who liked to learn to read, she was very good and taught them a little. The pupils paid 3*d.* for the week and some went for 2 or 3 years.

There was great interest taken in their lace pillows, clean cloths to keep it spotless. The pins that ran down the right hand side were called foot pins and were threaded with tiny coloured beads almost to the point, leaving just the very point to stick in the parchment as the pattern they worked upon was called. There was much jealousy as to who had the best bobbins—a pretty sight they were. Bone, with names in all colours and wooden with names, and sweethearts would always give a bobbin with his name and glistening bead jingle to it, and it was greatly prized. This village was full of lace makers at that time, point linen, lisle worsted and cotton lace besides a more common called thread lace.

But Mrs. Friday has much to tell us about Syresham which is valuable to the historian, in addition to lace-making. In 1936 and 1937, instigated by Mr. C. D. Linnell, she ransacked her well-stored memory, fed from her youth up by an acute and intelligent interest in all that was going on around her, and wrote it all down. Incidentally she described her village as it was in the 'thirties in some detail, when the first world war and the many changes wrought by it were still vividly fresh in people's minds, and when, alas! a new agricultural depression was setting in. Since World War II our memories of the results of both these cataclysms have tended to become telescoped in our minds and this adds to the usefulness and interest of Mrs. Friday's account. But let her tell her own story :—

THE TALLYMAN'S GHOST.

More than a century ago, when the tallyman¹ was very much in evidence, one was seen to enter a house at Syresham on business and was never seen to come out again and not any trace was heard of him. This house was haunted and people would not live in it very long.

At last people rented it who saw a man with a pack on his back at different parts of the house. There was a consultation and it was decided to lay the ghost.

Now it was the order to get a parson or the best living man to be known to say the prayers for a restless spirit and so Tailor Colman of Silson [Silverstone] was the chief in charge and the spirit of the tallyman was laid in a well unused at the time never more to trouble this world again.

BURIED TREASURE.

There are signs of an old Roman wall on the main road about one mile to the east of the village and a field close by which goes by the name of the Guinea Field as there have, for a great number of years, been guineas turned up when they ploughed it. I have myself seen three of them. I have heard it said they were buried when Cromwell came to the village. It is said that at the toll-gate, at the entrance from the main road, a witch lived and a man with a pair of horses and cart would not pay toll quick enough for her. She cast a spell over the horses and they would not move till the driver slashed till he fetched blood which was the only thing to break a spell. The horses afterwards went at a terrific speed towards Buckingham on their way to London.

1. A man who went round the villages selling things on account, payment being made by instalments. The term is still in use in the district.

ACCOMMODATION LANE.

An old couple told me about the times of their young days. It almost seemed incredible. In the days of their courtship there were dances held on the green and in the skittle alleys ; there was one at the *Bell Inn*. The music was supplied by a concertina and violin. It was customary to call the tune and pay the piper before the dance started : the musician came round with the hat, each dancer paid *1d.*, so payment was always sure.

The man, when he got on in life, took to having too much at times and when he was at work he had to pay up all his debts. One time he sent his wife to pay up at the shops. On doing this the shopkeeper put paid to the bill and on asking for more this Saturday night the shopkeeper refused, so she went empty away. The next day, Sunday, the man went into the Accommodation Lane for his dinner from the hedge—hips and haws and crab-apples, but it taught him a lesson : he always said afterwards, “Keep a shot for yourself, my gel.”

THE MAN WITH THE BIG NOSE.

Some fifty years ago or more there lived in Syresham a little man with a very prominent nose dressed always the same—corduroys with gaiters—was always seen carrying an old tin can on a shoulder stick. He was an old quack vet and nicknamed Doctor. He used to pretend to cure everything in animal line. His wife used to help him when she wasn't gathering horse manure for her garden from the roads and streets. She used to go for it a mile away from home. She went one better than her old man. She dabbled in human ailments such as making poultices from crushed snails for applying to a carbuncle or boil, prolonging the agony of the patient just for a few pence. Almost in every case the doctor had to be called in at last to effect a cure.

Whooping cough remedy of hers—open a nut very carefully, catch a spider and put it in the place of kernel, bind the nut up in muslin tight and hang it round the neck for 6 weeks. As the spider took the cough it killed it and the child lost it.

The old man was at a farm attending a horse and cow. A ploughboy was told off to help him. The job hung on for some time. The boy got interested. He said one day when on the job “Doctor, I didn't know you gave the same stuff to a horse you do to a cow.” He replied : “And, me lad, you *don't* know, you're born to it. You got a lot to larn. Dunt it shake it up and down for the horse, backwards and forwards for the coo.” He used to tell people what he did'nt know weren't worth knowing.

THE LAW OUTWITTED.

On a winter night a long time ago a Syresham man was tracked back to the village by a keeper who swore he saw him poaching. He was summoned and in due course sentenced to six weeks. The man stoutly denied being anywhere near the place spoken of. All this the guilty man who lived near by quietly watched and waited. He could earn by his skilled labour twice as much as the imprisoned man and the victim was often short of work as he was at the present time, and also not caring anything about what people thought of him. Arrangement was made between them for the guilty man to keep his wife and children till he came out of prison again.

OYEZ ! OYEZ !! OYEZ !!!

I remember the Town Crier as he was called in the village, his name was James, shouting and ringing his bell and " Oh Yes, Oh Yes, A fire in a barn and premises in Bell Lane." The fee was 1s. to employ him. In some fields [which] they call Church Hell, witches used to ride hurdles and ghosts were very frequently seen also in Church End and Half Way Gutter, mostly in the shape of a Black Dog accompanied by the souging of trees with a fearful wind following.

SYRESHAM BAND.

In this village there was once a Drum and Fife Band and it was a credit to the village. There was practice regularly and it was thought a great deal of. Several of the fifes are still in the village. They used to parade the village on a Saturday evening and march into a barn called Stocks Barn and play for dancing and most of the villagers would go up and see and hear them. They used to play on festive occasions. The last time they played was at Queen Victoria's Jubilee and the drums were given to finish up at the Armistice, the very end of Syresham Drum and Fife Band.

Armistice Day is always kept up by a service in the schools. It takes the place of a United Service and a poppy and laurel wreath is put on the memorial to the fallen. Almost the whole population attend. There is a British Legion and a Oddfellows Club which is strong for a village this size.

" Where village statesmen talked with looks profound
And news, much older than them all, went round."

Thus, with an apt quotation from Goldsmith, does Mrs. Friday end her tale. It is hoped, that by printing all these stories, *told by the villagers themselves, and in their own words*, that an authentic portrait of life as lived in the last century and a half in our south Northamptonshire villages has been put before our readers. The humdrum round of toil was always there of course as a background, as it always will be, but there was vigorous exuberance and a *joie de vivre* alongside the hardships and poverty, and a faultless touch on the aesthetic side. Would that I could present to the reader the songs the villagers sang and the tunes they danced to a century ago ! A dwarf-like cunning characterised their attitude to the twin giants of the law and the upper classes, which included the parson and the " gentlemen " farmers, as they called them. The tricks they played on them added a considerable zest to life. But to outwit anybody caused the most intense amusement, and stories of successful practical jokes lingered on for generations. On the whole, the forest villagers were of a philosophical turn of mind, ready to make the best of life and to laugh at their own misfortunes as well as at those of other people. In very few of these stories is the subject of poverty dwelt on.

It was undoubtedly the agricultural depression starting in 1879 and lasting, except for a short break during and after the first world war, until 1939, which knocked the bottom out of village life and drove the young men overseas or into the large towns, and the introduction of machinery and large-scale industry which swept the cottages bare of home-made furniture and hand-made ornaments and filled them with mass-produced vulgarities from the factories or soul-less standardised suites of furniture. But with the need for food and a prosperous agriculture, the rural areas are looking up again, the Women's Institutes and Village Halls have done a great work, life is anything but dull, and with better times the villages are regaining their self-confidence and making their weight felt in the country once again.

WIMERSLEY BUSH.

A GLIMPSE OF SHAKESPEARE'S GRAND-DAUGHTER IN NORTHAMPTONSHIRE.

In 1649, the year of King Charles I's execution, John Bernard of Abington, near Northampton married Elizabeth, widow of Thomas Nash, and daughter of Dr. and Mrs. Hall of Stratford-on-Avon. Mrs. Susannah Hall was the favourite daughter of William Shakespeare. Northampton can claim that Elizabeth Bernard, Shakespeare's last living descendant, died not only within what is now the Borough, but in a house which the Corporation now own and use as a Museum.

There is at Lamport a draft letter in the handwriting of Sir Justinian Isham, Bart. (1611-1675), written on the back of a letter from his daughter Elizabeth, dated 13th April, 1659 (I.L. Corr. 487), which gives a glimpse of the Bernards. This has escaped the attention of the researchers into Shakespeare's family.

It is clear from this letter that John Bernard, not yet a knight, was trying to raise money on his Abington property, on terms which Sir Justinian Isham did not consider favourable to the lender, and that his wife (Shakespeare's grand-daughter) had a jointure of £200 per annum. It must be emphasised that the letter is only a draft, and therefore incomplete. There is nothing to show to whom it is addressed—presumably to Sir Justinian's lawyer.

In 1669, John Bernard sold the manor and advowson of Abington for £13,750 to William Thursby, thus breaking his family connection with Abington, which had lasted for nearly 250 years.¹

The draft letter now follows :—

' Sir,

Mr. Bar[nard] hath a desire to borrow 6000L upon his Land at Abington, for 7 yeares, for one thousand to pay 60L yearely by Interest, to pay nothing for the 5000L till 7 yeares are expired, wch being in the nature of a reversion [will^d] is (as I am told) be cast up² at compound Interest, & then that 5000L at 6 pr cent will come to about 7518L. I had rather have the Interest paid halfe yearely, for the wholle, & that to be called in upon 6 or 12 months notice on either side, but that Mr. Barnard³ says he cannot doe, now whether all the land he hath at Abington (200 pr ann being for Jointure to his wife) wch in the whole he rates at [.] *left to be filled in* but have not yet any particular of, can be sufficient security (though cleare) for so great a sum I somewhat doubt. However I should expect to have a prise according to a reasonable value sett, that I paying so much more mony at the end of 7 yeares in case my mony be not then pd [paid] in I may have an absolute sale of the land, my intent thereby being only to be maister of my mony againe wch els I know not wel how to be. But Mr. Barn. intending an improvment I find some difficulties in his proposalls however hee is very importunat, & assures mee you are already acquainted what cloggs are on the estate & that you know the present value of it, so that I desire yr opinion both of the sufficiency [& clearness¹] of the security wch he offers, or can be made out of that estate for such a sum as he desires & may amount to before it be payd.²

1. Victoria County History of Northampton, Volume IV, ed. Salzman, 1937, pp. 65 et seq. 2. Sir Justinian has written "will . . . be" crossed out the "will" & substituted "is," but not deleted the "be." 3. Bernard was pronounced Barnard (cf. Verney pronounced Varney). It was sometimes spelled phonetically.

In the margin of this draft are the following notes :—¹

- ¹ 'scurvi grass seed sed q[uaere]
- [?] 'mail roome'
- 'Flints Sir Hen mony Mar 4 q[uaere]'
- 'Carew marriage book discharged.'

Sir John Bernard remained friendly with the Lamport family, for on 4th September, 1673, Thomas Isham, then aged 17 recorded in his Latin diary (ed. Walter Rye, privately printed, Norwich, Miller & Leavins, 1875) :—

"Sir John Barnard with Mr. Garner the surgeon came to dinner. Sir John said the Swedes took it ill that the Ambassadors of the Dutch were not willing for peace, and for this reason, had sent an Embassy to France, to say they were ready when necessary, to send 16,000 or 20,000 auxiliaries." At this time, the Swedes had undertaken to mediate in the war between Holland, France and England, and Charles II after the comparative failure of the battle of the Texel, when Admiral Sir Edward Spragge was killed, was considering peace with Holland. It is a pity that Sir John Bernard instead of retailing this gossip about the war, did not let fall a remark about Shakespeare, in whose works young Thomas Isham appears elsewhere to have been interested. (L. von Ranke, *History of England in 17th Century*, Vol. III, Cap 8 and 10, 1875).

GYLES ISHAM.

(In the conveyance of Abington Manor in 1669 by Sir John Bernard, Dame Elizabeth, his wife and four others, including Henry Smith of Stratford-upon-Avon, gent., to the trustees of William Thursby (N.R.O., Overstone 544, 545) there is a covenant to levy a fine for the barring of Dame Elizabeth's claim to dower in the said manor. In the Clayton collection at the N.R.O. (MSS. 1—4) there is an abstract of title and a particular of the manor made for Sir John Langham, which includes the following description : "A faire new built house with three large gardens, a close [of 3 acres], two little courts and a great court, a barn and yard with a dovecoat and a backstable yard, all which cost above 2,500 *li.* and are now valued at 1550 *li.*").

1. These notes may have no connection with the draft. Sir Justinian's daughter, Susannah, had married Nicholas Carew of Beddington in 1656. It was his habit to write one or more drafts on the back of letters received, and to make notes. There is another draft on the blank page of this letter which is obviously addressed to Elizabeth Murray, Countess of Dysart, an old friend. "My Lady Diser" had received Sir Justinian's daughter Elizabeth in Suffolk "with great civilytie," and this had been the main subject of her letter to her father.



A KIRBY HALL RECEIPT.

HOW TO MAKE A RICE PUDDING MY LADY KILLMURRIES WAY.

Tak a quartr of a pound of Ric, pick it and wash it and put it in a flaggon of new milk wth cinamon, mace, and nutmegges, and stop it close and set it into a pot of boyling water to seeth it, and when it is all of a thicknes poure it into a dish and season it with rose-water and sugar and grated nutmeg and the yolks of 7 egges and the whites of two and a pretty size of fresh butter and butter your dish and bake itt.

The peerage of Kilmorey was created in 1625. See *Complete Peerage*.