

Some Irish Industries.

I.—THE POPLIN WEAVERS OF DUBLIN.



IN Dublin, as in most cities, there are districts little known except to those whom poverty or business brings thither: districts once the haunts of rank and fashion, but now frequented only by the poorest of the poor. Such is the Coombe, the refuge of exiled Huguenots in 1685, the home for generations of weavers, and the centre of the Irish poplin trade. Those whom chance leads to explore this quarter, are surprised to find amidst the squalor houses whose broad frontage, wide doorways, large windows, and decorated lintels show, even when broken or defaced, that skill and wealth were lavished on their erection. Within, the worn, grimy staircases are broad and frequently enriched by carvings, the mantels bear half-obliterated coats-of-arms, while elaborate cornices adorn the principal rooms, into each of which a family is now crowded. In Weaver's Square, and neighbouring courts and alleys, there are dwellings whose high-pitched roofs and dormer-windows have a distinctly foreign aspect; but comparatively few of these quaint survivals now exist, since innumerable rookeries have been swept away and replaced by artisans' dwellings of the brightest red brick, more comfortable, perhaps, but infinitely less picturesque.

When Louis XIV. revoked the Edict of Nantes, nearly fifty thousand Huguenots emigrated to England; amongst them were nobles, gentlemen, and artisans, who founded colonies at Spitalfields and Norwich. Of the artisans, many were silk weavers, who continued to ply their trade in exile, and gradually increased their business. Soon the refugees became too numerous, and looked for other quarters in which to settle. The Government was anxious at the time to introduce into Ireland some manufacture that would not interfere with any English industry, for it had recently suppressed the woollen trade of that country, as clashing with the corresponding branch of English commerce, and many workmen were thrown out of employment in consequence. The refugees were therefore invited to establish themselves in Dublin, and accordingly, in 1693, several of their number arrived in that city. They chose for their residence the Coombe (or Valley), which lies in the heart of the city, and forms part of the "Liberties" of Dublin, so called because of certain privileges once accorded to dwellers therein. Two chapels were set apart for French Protestant worship; one of these was in Peter Street, the other was the ancient Lady Chapel of St. Patrick's Cathedral, and Swift, according to tradition, often joined in the service held in the latter, or sat listening to the lengthy sermons, half-hidden by a friendly pillar.

Some of the new-comers belonged to the upper classes, and the names of D'Olier, Dubedat, La Touche, and others familiar to Dubliners, show how firm was the hold these refugees took on the country of their adoption. The La Touches, originally from Blois, established a bank, and, taught tolerance by their own sufferings, were the first to give credit to, and open accounts with, Roman Catholics, who were as unpopular with the Government in those days in Ireland, as the Huguenots had been in France.

The settlers amalgamated with the people amongst whom they lived. By degrees they dropped many foreign customs, they married Irish wives, they changed their names, either translating them into English, or calling themselves by some title whose sound approximated to the French. Blanc and Lebrun thus became White and Brown, Dulau was transformed into Waters, and Le Sauvage into Savage and Wilde. While those belonging to the upper classes kept to the Reformed religion, most of the artisans became Catholics after a few generations, or at least suffered their children to be brought up in that faith, and these changes of name and of belief render it almost impossible to trace their descendants at the present day. If one does by chance come across a weaver of "the old stock," he differs in nothing from the purely Irish population around him. Connection with the Huguenots through some grandfather or great-grandmother is, however, not uncommon, and is a source of pride to many a worthy Irishman. One of the last genuine descendants of the refugees was a man named Ivres, who died some years ago, and who preserved many of the characteristics of his forefathers, though he did call himself *Ivers*. One permanent trace of their residence in the Coombe the Frenchmen have left. Londoners born within sound of Bow Bells are supposed to have more than ordinary difficulty with the unruly letter h, and a decided tendency to confuse their v's and w's. In like manner, Dubliners born within hearing of the chimes of Christ's Church or "Patrick's," wrestle vainly with the consonants th. On their lips "this and that" becomes "dis an' dat," so that "a Liberty boy" may readily be known by this peculiarity, although the speech of the foreigners whom the children once imitated is heard in that quarter no more. But we anticipate—in 1693 looms whirred in every garret, and French was as much the language of the Coombe as it used to be of Soho.

Silk weaving soon became an important branch of Irish industry. The Government protected the manufacture in a special manner at the outset. The Irish Parliament passed enactments intended to benefit the silk trade, and placed it under the care of the Royal Dublin Society, which appointed a board of twelve directors to look after its interests. These noblemen and merchants offered a bounty of twelve per cent. on all silk goods manufactured in the country after June,

1764, and deposited for sale in their warehouse in Parliament Street. So flourishing was the trade at this time, that the annual sales amounted on an average to £70,000, and the material was celebrated far and wide. Evil days, alas! were at hand. By a subsequent Act passed in the twenty-sixth year of George III., the Society was forbidden to dispose of any portion of its funds in supporting an establishment where Irish silks were sold. In 1783 the sales had declined in value to £25,000.

Irish poplin is, as most of our readers are aware, a mixture of silk and wool, the first forming the warp, the last the weft. Silk probably ran short during our wars with France, and some ingenious workman devised this plan of doing with half the usual quantity. The exact date when the two were first combined cannot be clearly ascertained. Thomas Reynolds, a member of the United Irishmen, who betrayed Lord Edward Fitzgerald, claimed (according to his life written by his son) that his grandfather, who was engaged in the silk trade, was the first to manufacture poplin, but others have disputed the distinction. In one of her letters from Ireland, Mrs. Delaney speaks of buying "a tabby night-gown" for her sister; could this "tabby" have been the original of our modern tabinet, or was this last a softer quality of the first-named?

From 1783 to the present day the manufacture of poplin has struggled on, sometimes employing many workmen, again finding occupation for very few. The material is so beautiful, so soft, so durable, so richly coloured, so easily adapted to every style of drapery, that it deserves wider popularity than has fallen to its share. In 1840 Mr. Otway reported that "people bought the goods for charity's sake." There should be no charity in the matter; poplin has intrinsic merits that entitle it to a high place in public favour. Some of the best Parisian houses have discovered its merits, and most lovely are the robes, most graceful the clinging tea-gowns trimmed with costly Irish lace, that have been fashioned for the trousseaux of Frenchwomen of rank. This delicately-tinted fabric lends itself to every device that fashion can invent, and requires only to be known to be esteemed.

Being desirous of learning as much as possible of the process of manufacture, we began by visiting the establishments of Messrs. Atkinson and Messrs. O'Reilly, Dunne, and Co., who, with Messrs. Pim and Co., are amongst the principal makers of poplin for dresses, as Messrs. Fry and others are of poplin for curtains and upholstery. These firms gave valuable information, besides putting us in the way of seeing the weavers in their own homes.

Messrs. Atkinson had some looms at work on their premises in College Green at the time, and we were at once conducted to the winding room. Here, in one corner, was a woman turning a large wheel that set all the machinery in motion, while half a dozen others of different ages stood before a revolving frame, and with the utmost dexterity wound hanks of silk of every hue on reels. To an onlooker ignorant of its mysteries the work seemed very complicated, but the girls knotted or twisted, tied or broke the threads with

an ease and quickness born of long practice. Men were at work in a larger room above filled with looms, and each workman had before him a piece of poplin in process of manufacture. On one, a Jacquard loom, was a delicate figured tabinet; the pattern, ostrich-feathers of the *vieux rose* tint, most wonderfully true to nature in every soft curl and fibre, scattered on a ground of ivory-white. Like the Gobelin tapestry weaver, the weaver of brocade sees only the wrong side of his work, so we had to stoop and look under, at some risk to our headgear, to catch a glimpse of the beautiful effect when finished. Deep cardinal, dull grey, blue, black, innumerable were the shades of colour that flashed before our eyes as the looms whirred, and the shuttles shot backwards and forwards. Here was material for a Court train, there for a bridal dress. An old man with spectacles on nose was tediously occupied in putting all in order to begin—the most troublesome part of the affair. When the silk of the warp is wound on the great wooden rollers off the reels prepared by the women, and stretched on the loom, there is often a fortnight's hard work before the weaver in carefully picking every knot or irregularity, removing broken threads, and putting all in perfect order. The smallest defect passed over at this stage would injure the quality of the manufactured poplin. One advantage hand-looms have over steam-power: if anything goes wrong they may be stopped immediately, whereas, before steam can be shut off, a yard of the fabric, or more, is spoiled; still, every precaution is taken, and in this instance our spectated friend was examining the warp thread by thread, though these were fine as a spider's web. Over each weaver's head, but a little in front of him, hangs the pattern—innumerable squares of thick, whitey-brown cardboard connected together, and pierced with circular holes. By consulting this, the workman sees what groups of threads should be raised to produce a certain effect. At each shoot of the shuttle one of these squares folds up and the next drops into position, and thus they move in endless procession.

Having examined the different looms, and vainly tried to grasp the details of what is technically termed "the harness," we were shown the raw material dyed and undyed. Great twists of silk of every hue, from the faintest pink to the deepest crimson, from the palest sky-blue to darkest sapphire, from the tint of a Gloire de Dijon rose to a glowing orange, were piled one upon another. Hanks of wool of shades to correspond filled rows of shelves, and a quantity of both materials, as yet uncoloured, lay in order on the tables. The silk comes from China and from Italy; Indian silk, owing to its deeper natural colour, has been found less suitable. Some of the silk is dyed in Dublin, the rest in Coventry; it loses twenty-five per cent. of its weight in the process. Inferior silks, none of which are used in the manufacture of Irish poplin, actually gain the same amount, so clogged are the threads with foreign matter, which dissolves at the first shower of rain and leaves the material a limp rag without value or substance. Such goods can of course be sold cheaply by dishonest producers, but a single day's wear reveals their true

character. The wool comes from Australia; none other answers the purpose as well. Sheep were introduced from our greatest colony, but the quality of their fleece soon changed under the influence of a damper climate. The wool varies in thickness, some being as fine as thread; it is all hard, and very closely spun. We were told that a lady, desirous of seeing if it would answer for knitting, began a sock, but did not succeed, as owing to its fineness the work progressed but slowly, and when completed was not soft enough for use. This yarn is wound from spinning wheels by women on to the little bobbins which are placed in the shuttle and thrown across the silk. Patterns are furnished chiefly by Macclesfield, as those invented by Dublin schools of design were found impracticable. They are divided into small squares, each corresponding to a single thread, and roughly coloured, exactly like the hideous, old-fashioned, Berlin-wool patterns, except that, in this case, the colouring helps only to guide the workman, and does not in any way indicate the shades he is to choose in carrying out the design. The man who punches the cardboard patterns for the looms, counts these squares and makes his holes to correspond.

Having seen the entire process of manufacture, we were shown the rolls of poplin made up for sale, and nothing more beautiful of the kind could be imagined. Soft, rich, and uncrushable, the poplin falls in the most graceful folds; there is no stiffness nor hardness of outline where it is employed. Cream, white, pale blue, dull green, an exquisite pearl-grey, a delicate shrimp-pink, artistic yellows, and many others were unfolded for our benefit. Some handsome figured tabinets were also shown, amongst them the ostrich-feather pattern before mentioned, here reproduced in dull red on an old gold ground. Besides the brocades intended for dresses, there were many others in church colours, and of ecclesiastical designs. Of these, Messrs. O'Reilly, Dunne, and Co. had an immense stock, and seemed to make them a speciality. Poplin is particularly suited for religious uses, since, unlike inferior silks, it contains no cotton, a mixture of which last is, they say, forbidden by the rubrics, which recognise three materials only—silk, woollen, and linen. There were scarlets and purples sufficient to robe every cardinal and bishop in Europe, and all shades of green, yellow, red, and white for vestments. This branch of the poplin trade ought to be more lucrative than it actually is.

Having thanked those who had so obligingly given us information, our next step was to visit weavers working in their own homes; and, furnished with some addresses, we set out to explore the (to us) unknown Coombe.

With some difficulty we found the street and number that held the first place on our list. The weaver we wished to see was a woman, presumably about four or five-and-thirty. The weavers would seem to be a jealous class; they like to keep the trade in their own families, and son succeeds father with tolerable regularity. Of the women who weave, most are the daughters of weavers, and very excellent work they do, too, when sufficiently robust to bear the constant pressure upon the treadle.

The men once grumbled at girls getting the same pay as themselves, but were told that there was no reason why they should not, if they did as much and did it as well. This was startling doctrine to the complainants, who thought they deserved a higher wage because of their sex, and they went away discomfited.

Ellen C—— very soon made her appearance, a slight, somewhat worn-looking woman, with the snowy skin and black hair characteristic of one type of Irish good looks. There was very little to see, she remarked, but that she would be pleased to show us. Trade was bad; there was scarcely any demand for poplin, though to her mind there was no handsomer nor better material. She had just finished a piece of black, but had not yet taken it from the loom, and would be paid to-morrow. She did not know when she should have another order; perhaps very soon, perhaps not. She could weave about two yards in the day by constant application, and make ten or twelve shillings a week, sometimes more, when in work. Yes, poplin could be made cheaper and better than imported goods; if times were good, the manufacturers could afford to ask lower prices and yet give the best materials. She admitted the fabric was expensive, but then how good and durable it was, how superior to the trash sold as silk, weighted and clogged with dye! It was difficult to sell it for less when it was so little sought for, and so many had to make something by it.

The house was exquisitely clean, and this holds good of all the weavers' homes; even the poorest are distinguished for taste and neatness, squalid as is the neighbourhood where these people live. Ellen C—— had only two rooms, very poorly furnished, but in excellent order, though our visit was quite unexpected, and we took her unawares. In the outer apartment stood her bed with its snowy counterpane, which was screened off from the rest of the room. The central table, covered by a blue cloth, bore a flourishing geranium, a canary sang in the window, the uncarpeted floor was scrubbed white, the various chests of drawers and cupboards shone as if newly varnished, and a few gaudy religious pictures brightened the walls. The inner chamber was almost entirely filled by a loom, and here the poor, patient creature lived and worked all alone from year's end to year's end, happy if she succeeded in earning her daily bread. Elsewhere, the main features were pretty much the same, cleanliness and patient poverty on all sides.

Our most interesting interview was with a man who dwelt in one of the quaintest old houses in the locality, with a high-pitched roof, to whose strength and antiquity he drew our attention. At first he was rather gruff, but finding us really interested in his work, he brightened up and became quite voluble. No one who has not spoken to them knows how interesting are intelligent artisans. Theirs is the knowledge of experience, not of books; when they have complicated work to do, and are masters of it, they acquire, by that alone, an astonishing amount of useful information, and though they are unable to talk learnedly, they thoroughly understand what they say.

Having made friends with the weaver, he led us up a flight of rickety, corkscrew stairs to an attic vibrating with a whirring loom. The room held two, but one was idle, work being scarce; at the other sat his daughter, a pretty girl of twenty. Her fair hair was neatly braided, her black gown, though relieved by white frilling at neck and wrists and a coquettish apron, was simplicity itself; her manner was excellent, respectful but unembarrassed. Her work was brocade of an ecclesiastical character—crosses enclosed in circles, yellow on a white ground. To the beams of her loom she had pasted such pretty scraps as pleased her, and one or two ballads which we fancied she sang as she worked. Beside her stood a mug of spring flowers, and she drew our attention to her good fortune in having a distant view of green fields, and even of the hazy outlines of the Dublin mountains across the housetops. "It was an advantage," she said, "to be placed so high." One might build a romance of the quaint old house, and the young life flourishing in its gloomy shadow. The maid seemed an innocent Lady of Shalott, humming softly to herself as she cast her shuttle, and watching her embroidery grow beneath her touch, in the happy days before she looked down to Camelot. Her father soon chased such idle imaginings. This was a proud family; they had been weavers father and son in the same house for nearly two hundred years, and the blood of French Huguenots flowed in their veins. If it was mixed with a large proportion of Irish this did not tend to lessen their pride, and the old man was eager to tell how his grandfather was the first to invent or adopt this or that improvement, and what marvellous work his father had done for some long-dead, noble lady. There were no better weavers in Dublin, he said, than his two sons. One of them was employed on handsome curtains at a manufactory near; should we like to see them? We answered in the affirmative, and another girl, even prettier than the first, was summoned, who said she would be delighted to show the ladies the way, and while she put on her hat and jacket, her father talked on.

Times were bad, said he too; poplin was not appreciated as it should be. There were so many middle profits to be made that prices had to be kept up. "Would it be better," we asked, "if the workman and the public were brought in more immediate contact, if a man could make what he liked for any individual?" "Yes, undoubtedly," he replied; "but then the trades unions would not approve of that, as some weavers might get too much to do, and others none at all." Silk handkerchiefs, he told us, had been imported from England and sold at a very low price. He offered to make some similar, but of better material, at the same cost. Yet it fell through somehow—the public preferred the poorer kind; he could not understand it.

We descended to the living-room, its bulging windows filled with geraniums; amongst its quaint old furniture was a carved bookcase, a genuine antique, which the owner evidently valued. In one corner stood a queer apparatus, and the floor around was strewn with tiny circles like fairy coinage. This, the father explained, was used for punching the weavers' patterns; one of his sons was the only man in Dublin who could make them.

They were expensive, costing sometimes over ten pounds, and seldom less than four, the number of holes in each amounting to hundreds of thousands in a complicated design. Near this was a spinning wheel for filling the bobbins with wool. This was his good woman's business, and we had glimpses of an inner apartment with another idle loom. On the ground floor the wife was occupied in tediously picking the warp of a web in readiness for her husband; in fact, every room had in it some implement of a weaver's trade. By this time "Mary," as he called her, had donned a neat black hat and jacket, and was ready to conduct us, so with many thanks to her father, who was with difficulty induced to accept a small gratuity, we started through a maze of lanes and alleys. Our destination was a house exactly like hundreds to be seen in any French town. We entered through a wicket in the great *porte-cochère*, and found ourselves in a square courtyard, across which we made our way. The place seemed half-ruinous, but we succeeded in climbing some steep stairs. On every side in the great bare rooms were looms, these all unoccupied, some broken, some in working order; but the place quivered with the rattle of machinery from above. At last we found Mary's brother in the upper storey, and the curtains on which he was engaged justified his father's praise. He had been three weeks getting them in order, and had only done about a finger-length. Once fairly started, he could do nearly three yards in the day. The loom was of unusual width, and very heavy. In the same apartment were several women and girls engaged in making carriage lace, while some men were weaving a coarse sort of corded material used on the seats of tram-cars. My pretty conductress seemed a general favourite, for not a few of the men brightened at her approach and asked when was she coming back to work. For each she had a laughing reply, grieved as she evidently was at having nothing to do.

As we passed again through the desolate rooms below, with their rows of dusty, unused looms, we wished that the good old days of the silk trade had returned for Ireland, and that a workman sat at each, singing as he cast his shuttle. Whether prosperity will or will not again visit the poplin weavers, lies in the hands of the public, and theirs is the fault if an industry so useful, so interesting in itself, its origin, and its location, is allowed still further to decay. As has been shown, most of the men work only now and then; they get an occasional order that keeps them from starvation, but customers are too few to insure constant employment to the large body who live directly or indirectly by weaving. By a strange mischance the poplins one usually sees in London shop-windows are by no means attractive in colour, being too often either crude or dingy. Why the buyers for these establishments do not choose something prettier would be difficult to say, since the loveliest tints are to be had at the same price, and with increased demand would come increased perfection. May we hope that at the Irish Exhibition our readers will examine for themselves this beautiful material, and judge whether or not the Irish may be proud of this relic of the Huguenots?

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