

## NOTTINGHAM LACE AND FASHION.

IN attempting to form an estimate of the trade of Nottingham, and the extent to which her prosperity is dependent upon Fashion, perhaps the most important fact to grasp at the very outset is that the Nottingham of to-day is in a vastly different position from the Nottingham of twenty or thirty years ago. Then she held almost a complete monopoly of the lace trade. For all practical purposes she had no rivals, either in England or abroad. To-day she holds a monopoly of one very large and important branch of the lace trade, but she has to share and compete for the trade in the other branches with numerous rivals.

The lace trade may be divided into the following departments. There is the curtain trade, the plain net trade, and the fancy lace trade. The two first branches need not detain us; there are curtain machines and plain net machines all over the world, manufacturing articles which are in constant demand, and which are not dependent to any considerable extent upon Fashion. Nottingham—and the surrounding district—is still the largest producer of these articles, but she cannot be said to possess a monopoly. It is the fancy lace trade upon which the prosperity of Nottingham depends. Fancy lace is also divisible into three great branches—the cotton lace, the silk lace, and the embroidery lace. The cotton and silk lace are made upon what is known as the Levers machine; the embroidery lace is made upon a machine of a totally different character. Nottingham's position at the present moment is this: She has no serious rival in the manufacture of the best classes of cotton lace; in the fine silk trade her great rivals are Calais and Caudray; there are lace machines at Derby, Ilkeston, and Long Eaton, which compete for the trade in the commoner classes of cotton lace; while all alike have to compete with the embroidery lace machines of Switzerland and Plauen. It is upon this fancy lace then that Fashion exercises its influence.

There is of course a regular and constant trade in lace from year to year, quite independent of the fact whether it is fashionable or not. Lace is as regularly used in Spain and the Spanish-speaking countries of South America as macintoshes are in the English Lake District. The shipping trade from Nottingham to these countries may be regarded as constant. The very beauty of lace again is sufficient to create a demand for it, even when it cannot be said to be fashionable. Lace has always been popular for the milliner's art, and it is the most fitting material with which to trim linen or calico. Yet even in this respect it is stated that the demand for lace has somewhat fallen off since the cry of 'all wool' has been successfully raised, and found supporters among the faculty of medicine. Of this falling-off Fashion seems to be entirely innocent. Yet despite this constant trade, it is nevertheless true to say that Nottingham is not busy, and therefore is not prosperous, except the fashion-plates declare that lace is in the fashion—in other words, except lace is the predominant trimming for dresses and bonnets. The ordinary constant trade is not sufficient. Nottingham's prosperity depends upon her monopoly, and her monopoly is the finest lace.

There is a local saying that lace is fashionable every ten years. In other words, out of ten consecutive seasons there is one in which lace is becoming fashionable, one in which the fashion is at its height, one in which it is dying out, and seven in which it is not worn as an article of fashion at all. This saying has been founded upon experience, and therefore deserves some credit. For example, the lace trade was good from 1869 to 1872, it was good and at its best from 1879 to 1882, and now again in 1893 lace is in fashion. For history to have repeated itself to

the letter, the turn of the tide ought to have come in 1889, but there is a very adequate reason to explain why it did not. In the spring of 1882, when Nottingham was at its busiest, a new machine was invented which produced an entirely new species of lace. That was what is known as the embroidery machine. The machine was brought over to Nottingham and exhibited to the leading manufacturers of the town. The patent was offered to them, and they refused it. In doing so they made a mistake which they have regretted to this day. For immediately afterwards a purchaser was found who considerably improved the machine, started factories in Switzerland, and became at once the greatest rival that Nottingham has had. The consequence was that this new embroidery lace caught the fancy of the market and became popular. Thus when at the end of 1882 the ordinary run of fashion in lace had spent itself, and Nottingham found itself with no orders to execute, the novelty of the new embroidery lace prolonged the fashion for another two or three years, and people wore lace continuously for five or six years—from 1879 down to 1885. It is therefore still true to say that history has repeated itself in the present instance, though the invention of the embroidery machine has had the effect of delaying the turn of the tide, as far as Nottingham lace is concerned, for three years. And now, though lace is fashionable, there are two distinct branches of the trade competing for the popular favour. There are two monopolists in the field—Nottingham and Switzerland—making different species of lace and using totally different machines.

This being so, there are few business men in Nottingham who anticipate that the great flush of trade which they enjoyed from 1879 to 1882 will repeat itself during the present time of good trade. People in speaking of those three years look back to them as a golden age which is never likely to return. There are even some candid business men who confess that their profits reached an almost immoral height and that the gold they made so easily proved to be the gold of Midas and brought a Nemesis with it. When the twist-hands at their machines were earning £5 a week, it is easy to conceive that their masters were making colossal fortunes. When in four or five years artisan dwellings increased so rapidly that from thirty to forty miles of new street piping were laid down, one may understand why at the same time Nottingham began to acquire a reputation for its residential villas. Without attaching too much importance to the theory that a town which depends for its livelihood upon the manufacture of a luxury must insensibly become a luxurious town (which is the unpleasant side of the argument that Nottingham owes much of her good taste to the tasteful article she produces), it is incontestably true that the depression which fell upon the town after 1882 owed much of its intensity to the very magnitude of the prosperity through which it had just passed. It is easy to be wise after the event, and that is the wise saw behind which those who invested their large profits in new and expensive plant undoubtedly sheltered themselves.

Fashion changed, there were no orders to execute, and many shadows fell over the threshold of the Bankruptcy Court. Capital has a habit of finding its way almost too readily into a trade which is momentarily prosperous, and it is only the most level-headed of business men who, when they are already making much, can resist the temptations to make more. For new plant in a trade like the lace trade, which is dependent upon a caprice, is a hazardous investment. A lace machine with all the latest improvements costs from £800 to £1000. And when it is estimated that in times of severe depression no less than from 50 to 60 per cent. of the machines are standing idle, it is obvious that loss of interest on capital alone may easily swell up to a very large figure.

Nottingham has realised very thoroughly during the last few years how dangerous it is for an important town to depend for its livelihood upon an article of fashion. Until recently she was entirely dependent upon lace and hosiery. But the distress that was prevalent among the lace hands, and the enforced curtailment of expenses among the lace manufacturers, has resulted in the introduction of new industries into the town, such as the cycle and tobacco industries, the demand for which is constant. For though if the earnings and profits of a decade were taken in the bulk and divided equally over the whole period, it would be found that the product left a good margin upon which to live, equal to that of any constant trade, human nature being what it is, it cannot be expected that the bulk of artisans and manufacturers would look forward to the rainy days that are as much as seven years ahead, and curtail their rate of living accordingly. A workman who is earning his two pounds a week constantly for ten years is better off than one who for a year or two may feel himself a rich man and for the remaining eight is constantly being pinched.

From the point of view of the operative, the character of the lace trade is not by any means an unmixed blessing. He is paid by the piece, the unit of measurement being the rack, which is 1920 motions of the machine. Now the machines are worked in double shifts of ten hours each, and a workman therefore working full time does not work more than fifty hours a week net, if one deducts the time that is taken off for meals. What he earns in those fifty hours of course depends on the character of the lace that he is making, upon its quality and its width. (The wage-table of the Lace-Workers' union is as intricate as an astrologer's calculation sheet, and would require almost an apprenticeship to understand.) But given continuous work, the twist hand is enabled to earn thoroughly good wages. When lace is fashionable, he does find continuous work. When there is only the constant ordinary trade to supply, his employment is but intermittent except he be exceptionally fortunate. If the design which he is engaged upon proves popular, and there are large orders to execute, it often happens that one machine is kept going for weeks together, while a second machine is standing idle, and the hands employed at it are earning nothing. That is an accident to which all manufacturing machines are

liable, but the more liable just in proportion as the design is more elaborate, the expense of arranging the machine for the design the heavier, and the dangers of unsaleable stock the greater. The workman, in short, is not only dependent upon fashion, but upon whether the machine at which he is engaged is making a pattern which hits the popular taste. His work is intermittent, and his wages vary accordingly.

Some other directions in which the position of those engaged in the industry is affected by its character may be mentioned. The best machines costing, as has been said, no less than £1000, it is not surprising that the trade is for the most part undertaken by men in a very large way of business and men in a very small way. In this respect the industry is unique. Comparatively speaking there are few large lace mills in Nottingham worked entirely by one firm. There are some of course, but what one notices is the absence of the small factories so common in the manufacturing districts of Yorkshire. A large proportion of the mills are let out in floors, and even these floors are sub-let again into standings, so that in a single mill there might be no less than twenty lace manufacturers. Now it is a well-established fact that the presence of the small manufacturer is undesirable in almost every industry. He has an ugly knack of bringing down prices. Especially in times of depression, when the competition for what little business there is to be done is very keen, he is at a natural disadvantage with the large manufacturer, and, simply to keep his machine going, bids for an order at a price that is barely remunerative. Fortunately his workmen are not allowed to accept a lower rate of wages by the rules of their Association than that which is at the moment the standard rate, but it is clear that this cutting of prices has an ill effect upon the market, and tends to the production of a common rather than a high quality of lace. The small manufacturer is further hampered by the fact that great improvements have been made in the Levers machine of late years. His machines are often old-fashioned, and he cannot afford to sink new capital in the purchase of the newest pattern. The wealthy manufacturer can and does. Yet the best houses have to pay very heavy prices for their superiority. It is to be remembered that lace is perhaps the most artistic of our English manufactures, and that every season, to satisfy the requirements of the staple trade, new designs have to be got out, and that the designer is a very highly-salaried individual. The very beauty of lace creates a demand for it, and the manufacturers have to rely very largely upon the beauty and tastefulness of their designs to create a demand and challenge the pockets of the buying public. In short, the expenses of a manufacturer are just the same if not greater when lace is out of fashion than they are when it is in fashion. He has to force the trade.

We may conclude therefore that the influence of fashion upon the Nottingham lace trade is paramount, and that the sudden bounds of prosperity, followed by long periods of depression, to which the trade is

subject have had a bad and unsteady influence upon the town. As time goes on, Nottingham must lose still more of the monopoly she once possessed. Fashion herself, which is notoriously changeful and capricious, seems to show signs of becoming more changeful still. It seems hardly likely that any particular fashion will last as long or be as paramount as it used to be. Nottingham has very wisely recognised this by launching out into new ventures, and providing more strings to her bow. On the other hand, there would seem good reason for believing that, with the gradual improvement of taste and appreciation of the beautiful among the lower classes, the demand for lace may increase. Hitherto the many have not known lace. When they do, although there will be more rivals, there will be a far greater volume of business done.

While dealing with the influence of fashion, it may be of interest to notice a fact which is likely enough to escape the gaze of the abstract economist, but which nevertheless has a very real influence upon trade. I refer to the various magazines which devote themselves to the prevailing fashions of the day. Such periodicals as *The Queen*, *The Lady*, *The Magazine of Fashion*, and the very numerous progeny to which they in a very short space of time have given birth wield a very tyrannical power. Their word is accepted as gospel, and their oracular sayings reach the ears of rich and poor alike. For almost every newspaper in the kingdom devotes at least a column a week to extracts from the columns of these higher-priced magazines; and this fashion column is now regarded as one of the 'features of the paper,' and readers would greatly resent its omission. And the tittle-tattle of the drapers' shops, sometimes only a cleverly concealed advertisement, sometimes attaining to the dignity of a special article, is a further step in the same direction. To such an extent has the habit grown, that one of the leading London dailies devoted almost a column the other day to men's fashions, and gravely discussed whether the wearing of spats and the turning up of the trousers were fashionable at the time of writing. But the influence of these fashion articles may be seen in this: Everybody now knows, and knows quickly, what is the prevailing fashion. A peculiar hat is seen in M. Worth's rooms, and in a week women readers of weekly papers in the remote country districts of England are fully acquainted with all its peculiarities. It is now no uncommon thing for the retail trader to be told what is the fashion by his customers. Twenty years ago the customer came into his shop with the question on her lips. And one consequence has been to make fashion change with far greater rapidity than before, with the result that the manufacturer does not make for stock, and the retail trade does not buy for stock, to anything like the same extent. Another result has been to make any particular article of fashion much less engrossing than heretofore. A dozen things may be equally fashionable now at the same moment; and this being so, trade tends to become more shifty, more speculative, and more uncertain. The volume of business done

may be even greater than before, but it is spread over a far greater number of articles. The commercial traveller's sample cases increase in bulk, and yet each pattern he discloses is a very special line.

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J. B. FIRTH