



THE THIMBLE AND THIMBLE-MAKERS.

"For your own ladies, and pale visag'd maids
Like amazons, come tripping after drums;
Their thimbles into armed gauntlets change,
Their needles to lances." *King John.*

"And that I'll prove upon thee, though
Thy little finger be armed in a thimble."
Taming of the Shrew.

IN these days, when everything we see, hear, and touch is supposed to have a history, it is humiliating to have to confess that the thimble, a truly feminine article, is absolutely without any account of its origin or shape or use in early days.

I refused to believe in its non-existence, and felt that it must be somewhere, perhaps hidden under the dust of ages, and waiting only to be brought to light. But no; neither among the records in the British Museum nor in any bookseller's can anything be found about it.

I then went to the manufacturers of the thimble, thinking that in this age of universal knowledge they would be certain to know something of it, but their answer was short and decisive: "We manufacture the article, but know nothing of its origin or history."

Why, even the needle, which would be useless but for the thimble, has its history; so also its companion, the scissors; but of the thimble, neither record nor picture, nor even an engraving of it on a tombstone.

The first mention we get of it is in the twelfth century, but this in no sense helps us to its origin. It occurs in the collection of words of common things, written out by Hildegarde, and therefore we gather that it must have been in daily use in her time.

We have some little guide as to the shape of the thimble in the twelfth century by looking at the one dug out of the Burg Tannenber in the Bergstrasse at Darmstadt. You will find it in the illustrations.

The Burg itself was destroyed in 1399, and never built up again; therefore this thimble, which is now to be seen in the museum at Darmstadt, must have been in use before the destruction of the Burg. The shape, as you will perceive, is somewhat similar to ours; it is a very well-made bronze thimble.

As far as we can be certain of anything, the thimble is to be traced to the inventive and

ingenious artisans of Nürnberg, who were the acknowledged manufacturers of it in the fourteenth century.

It was not, however, until 1534 that the thimble-makers became what is called a corporate body, although for a whole century previously the Nürnberg merchants had carried thimbles with them for sale on their yearly expeditions to the great fairs of Leipsic, Ham-

"The bath-keepers, coopers, and thimble-makers amass no wealth."

The way in which the thimble-makers manufactured thimbles we are able to see from two old drawings of workshops in Nürnberg, which we are permitted to give in illustration.

The original of the first is in a book, published in 1568, the title of which was:—

"A truthful description of all things on the Earth, of all arts, handiworks, and crafts, illustrated by Jost Amman, the most prolific artist of the second half of the 15th century."

The second is a representation of a thimble-maker's workshop in the year 1698, by Christopher Weigel. There is more furniture here than in the former, and, according to the fashion of the age, is accompanied by some rather bombastic allegorical verses, which run something like this:—

"The strong protection of virtue,
Conquers the obstinacy of vice."
Patience is like a thimble:
If it cover heart and courage
Then no vice (needle) can wound it.
Needles sharpened by the tongue of slander
Must break at last
When praise and fame ennoble virtue.

A few lines are still in existence, written by Hans Sachs, in which he speaks of making thimbles out of brass, and of the way in which they are prepared and made ready for the tailors, shoemakers, needle-women, and embroiderers, and concludes by saying, "I am master of the craft."

The thimble marked 1595, which is now in the museum at Nürnberg, is evidently out of a Nürnberg thimble workshop. It is rather narrow and pointed, and like most of the articles of that period, adorned with ornaments and a proverb.

Beneath the little holes there is a row of stamps representing stars, lilies, animals, eagles, &c., and under these runs a proverb: *Wen Got wil, so ist mein zil.*

There were many thimbles made of gold and silver, designed by the goldsmiths for the use of rich and highborn dames, for presents

Der Fingerhüter *



Faksimile nach Jost Amman vom Jahre 1568.

burg, and Lubeck. In the shops, too, at this time we know they were offered for sale, for we find in one of the Shrovetide plays of the fifteenth century that a shopkeeper is made to say, while inviting the people to buy,

"Good thread have I in the underskirt,
Needles too, brushes and combs,
Thimbles, pockets, and laces,
Hooks and eyes in plenty."

The artisans of Nürnberg were ruled by the authorities with a rod of iron; they were allowed no independence of action even in trifles, and the regulations issued seemed to repress even the improvements of trade.

Thus, for example, in 1572 a thimble-maker named Jörg Endthor invented a twisting wheel, but he was forbidden to use it on pain of punishment, because it would have given him an advantage over other members of the craft.

One good rule, however, was strictly enforced, viz., that no inferior workmanship should be allowed to leave the city, thereby injuring its reputation. Perhaps one and all of these combined to prevent the thimble-makers' craft becoming a rich one.

We find on an old detached leaf, bearing date 1621, the following:—

* The Thimble-Makers.



Sketch of Thimbles by Theod. de Bry, 1561 to 1623.



Nürnberg Thimble of the year 1595.

Thimble of the 14th Century found in Darmstadt.

for the pretty bride, or the good wife; and now and then a goldsmith would on his own account expend time, talent, and money in order to produce a perfect and costly thimble for his sweetheart.

Among these was one Nikolaus von Benschoten, who lived two hundred years ago. His work was so beautiful, and called so much attention to the thimble, that it gave rise to the fable that he had invented it; whereas the fact was, that by his bringing it into notice it became an article of everyday necessity.

What Benschoten did invent was not the thimble itself, but the artistic ornamentation of it.

A copper engraver, by name Joh. Theo. de Bry, who lived from 1561 to 1623, produced a sheet covered with representations of the most beautiful thimbles, the richest of which were adorned with somewhat free mythological subjects. On the upper round of the thimble there is a cupid or a genie, surrounded by the inscription, "Force d'amour." "Vis amoris." "La puissance d'amour" (the power of love); see illustration.

It seems that up to the end of the seventeenth century the thimble was to be found in few places outside Nürnberg, Cologne, and Holland. There were at that time double thimbles, of which the under one was quite smooth and gilded, while the upper one was of silver, and entirely pierced through. A quaint writer of this period mentions the industries requiring the thimble, the workers in which, he says, can bear testimony to its usefulness. He notices also its characteristic of preserving the tender fingers of those praiseworthy ladies who work much, "thereby," as he says, "preventing much shedding of blood," which is still often innocently spilled when the thimble is not at hand.

I have been fortunate enough to find two thimbles at South Kensington Museum, and

Der Fingerhüter, Der Ungend starker Schütz, bezwingt der Lasten Critik.



*Bedüht ist wie ein Fingerhut,
steckunter diesem Herkuld Hut,
so stechen keine Lasten-Nadeln,
die der Verleumder Hofsheit weht,
dann dieser Spitze bricht zuerst
Was Lob und Ruhm diellustschuld adern.*

Faksimile aus dem Werke Christoph Weigel's vom Jahre 1698.

one at the British Museum. No. 1 is from a set of needle-case, thimble, and box. The thimble is silver-gilt, covered with openwork scrolls, filled in with coloured enamel. It belongs to the eighteenth century.

mediate of steel, thereby rendering it impénétrable; it is known as the *Doreas* thimble.

The word thimble seems to be derived from the Scotch Thummel or Thumb-bell, a sort of shield originally worn on the thumb.

No. 2 is of silver—the body of it is of filigree open work and scrolls—also of the eighteenth century.

No. 3 is at the British Museum. It is of silver, with portraits of Charles II. and his queen. There are some letters and figures on the lower border. It is an English-made thimble of the seventeenth century.

The group of thimbles and smelling-bottle is in reality one thimble; it is a most curious specimen, and was lent me by a friend whose great-grandmother used it.

In consequence of the Nürnberg Council issuing so many prohibitive laws, the thimble-making craft were unable to hold their own; they could neither make use of their own inventions, nor could they employ machinery; and they were soon surpassed by those of Aix-la-Chapelle, and other places, where restrictions had no power to prevent the employment of machines put in motion by water-power.

Thimbles seem to have been introduced into England as articles of common use by a man named John Lofting, who came over from Holland at the end of the seventeenth century, and established a thimble factory at Islington.

We seemed to have used a shield for the finger made of leather as early as the fourteenth century, which was called "Fingeling."

In October, 1884, a celebration took place in Amsterdam, of the bicentenary of the special thimble-making of Nikolaus von Benschoten, to which we have already alluded. At this gathering of thimble-makers a new thimble was introduced, which seems to avoid the faults of the ordinary steel and silver thimble, by being made in three distinct parts; the inner and outer being of silver, and the intermediate of steel, thereby rendering it impénétrable; it is known as the *Doreas* thimble.

The word thimble seems to be derived from the Scotch Thummel or Thumb-bell, a sort of shield originally worn on the thumb.



HOW LITTLE ONE CAN TELL!

A MAN in his carriage was riding along,
A gaily-dressed wife by his side;
In satins and laces she looked like a queen,
And he like a king in his pride.

A wood-sawyer stood on the street as he passed;
The carriage and couple he eyed,
And said, as he worked with his saw on a log,
"I wish I was rich and could ride."

The man in his carriage remarked to his wife,
"One thing I would do if I could—
I'd give all my wealth for the strength and the health
Of the man who is sawing the wood."

A pretty young maid with a bundle of work,
Whose face as the morning was fair,
Went tripping along with a smile of delight,
While humming a love-breathing air.

She looked in the carriage, the lady she saw,
Arrayed in apparel so fine,
And said, in a whisper, "I wish from my heart
Those satins and laces were mine."

The lady looked out on the maid with her work,
So fair in her calico dress,
And said, "I'd relinquish position and wealth
Her beauty and youth to possess."

Thus it is in this world, whatever our lot,
Our minds and our time we employ
In longing and sighing for what we have not,
Ungrateful for what we enjoy.

We welcome the pleasure for which we have sighed,
The heart has a void in it still,
Growing deeper and wider the longer we live,
That nought but Religion can fill.