

HOW OUR BUTTONS ARE MADE.



UNCONSIDERED trifles again, as it might appear, form the subject of the present paper; for in common conversation buttons share with pins the ignoble distinction of being usually chosen to express contempt. "I don't care a button," or "I don't care a pin," are convertible expressions. Yet buttons are not without importance in themselves, and their manufacture is not one of the least important of our industries, although it seems to take up but little room. In an international exhibition, for instance, it necessarily occupies but a very small space. The industry of a whole district might be represented in a single show-case, which nine visitors out of ten would pass without seeing. Among the more imposing products of human labour the modest button would have no chance of attracting attention, were it not that the exhibitor generally manages to make up a trophy by grouping great quantities of different sizes and varieties together. A tasteful arrangement of this kind might catch the eye, but few would stop to look at the buttons themselves; they would be thought scarcely worthy of a passing examination. Very few would reflect, or know, that earth and sea had been ransacked to furnish the contents of that case; that the most inventive brains had been racked in devising the form, fashion, and construction of those tiny bits of merchandise, and in suiting them to the flying fancy of the hour; that goodly fortunes had been made and lost by their fluctuations in popular regard. The fair spectator who paused to look for an instant, attracted perhaps by a button of new device, would little dream of the momentous consequences that might possibly result from that passing glance. She might take a fancy to the new button, and wear it; her example might be followed, and a new fashion might be set; and thereupon hundreds of workmen's homes would be flushed with a sudden prosperity. A mere whim of the moment, caught up and followed after the strange gregarious manner of our kind, has before now raised towns to affluence, or sunk them into pauperism.

Some changes of fashion in buttons have become historical, and have marked eras in the trade. There are some few people now living who can remember the time when the gilt button was your only wear—the dandy's dress-coat of bright blue, the merchant or manufacturer's soberer garment of snuff-brown, even the mechanic's Sunday suit, all blazed with as many gilt buttons as could well be stuck on. The satirical writers of that day inveighed against the inordinate use of these buttons, pretty much as satirists in our own day have railed against crinoline.

Then were the prosperous times for Birmingham button-makers. The town, which had already acquired the title of "Toy-shop of Europe," now became almost exclusively identified with the button manufacture. Great profits, high wages, and a long monopoly of the trade—these were fondly and regretfully remembered by the generation which is but just now passing away. Soon after the commencement of the present century the fashion began to decline, and the covered button gradually usurped the place of its gorgeous rival.

But the gilt button held on desperately for a long time, and could not easily be shaken off. It was even protected by law; for if no special enactment was absolutely obtained in its favour, advantage was taken of some old statutes which could be made to apply to it. Strange as it may appear, such statutes were in existence. Strutt tells us:—"In the fourth year of William and Mary a *new* Act was made in favour of the button-makers, which prohibited the importation of all foreign buttons made with *hair*. This again was followed by another six years afterwards, imposing a penalty of forty shillings for every dozen of covered buttons sold or set in garments." A still later Act imposed a penalty of five pounds "on any taylor or other person convicted of making, selling, using, or setting on to any garment any buttons covered with cloth or any stuff of which garments are made." Under these obsolete laws, tailors' claims were sometimes disputed with success, to the great joy of the gilt-button-makers, who thought the use of their wares would be forced upon the public. We know now-a-days that Acts of Parliament are powerless to lead fashion; so we need not to be told that the fancied protection was of no avail.

Another and, as we should be equally able to predicate, a not less futile expedient was thought of, as a last desperate effort to revive the almost extinct industry; and that was to obtain the patronage of some person of high distinction, whose example might perhaps set the old fashion going again. The young and handsome Prince Albert, who had just come over from Germany to marry our Queen, was at that moment the most interesting and popular person in England, and to him the thoughts of the button-makers naturally turned. A deputation of employers and artisans was appointed to wait on him, and implore him to save their livelihood by wearing gilt buttons. A Birmingham button-manufacturer relates:—"The rivalry of different firms for the fortunate honour of being the producers of such sets of buttons as should be selected by the Prince from the large assortment offered to his taste on that occasion, the urbanity of the Prince's reception of them, and so forth, were intoxicating topics of gossip and speculation among the trade in my boyhood." The present writer well remembers the first visit of the Prince to Birmingham, which must have taken place soon after, and how, as he made the round of the principal factories, the

admiring comments on his personal appearance were mingled with expressions of the highest delight at the fact that he wore gilt buttons. Alas! the hopes that were instantly and generally indulged in were doomed to disappointment. "These sanguine gentlemen," says the manufacturer just quoted, "had gradually to learn that a prince, however gracious, does not carry the fiats of the fickle goddess in his button-hole." The fashion was dead, and it could not be brought to life again.

The gilt button, however, still occupies the post of honour in an exhibition case, and still fulfils a distinct purpose in the human economy. It is now the head of the whole tribe or family of Uniform Buttons, which serve as badges of distinction to so many grades and orders of society. Not always honourable distinction, it may be; for there are some buttons made to honour, and some to dishonour—some to be the insignia of rank, and some to mark the pauper or the criminal. We have said that buttons are not without importance in themselves; who would gainsay it? Does the Chinese mandarin think *his* button of importance, I wonder? This group represents to us *Officialism*, that great power, in all its wonderful and varied phases. The two immense fighting services of the nation, the scarcely less numerous Civil Service and police, the whole great world of beadedness and flunkeydom, are here typified in their buttons. The officialism of trade is represented by the buttons of the railway and steam-packet services. And even as the infinite gradations of officialism, from lordliest power to humblest servitude, so are the descending shades of value in the material of their symbols, ranging from regal gold to common pewter and tin.

From a mere manufacturing point of view, this section of the button trade is one of the most important. Each individual device must be sunk in a special die; and for the regulars and militia alone not less than 3,000 dies would be required. A manufacturer who lays himself out for this kind of work, and for the stamping of military and other ornaments, clasps, &c. (a kindred business), must be content to sink a large capital in his dies, and have a great part of it lying idle on his shelves for years together. Some of the processes of manufacture would be interesting to a stranger, especially those by which a button is domed up, plated, burnished, and *afterwards*, with all its effulgence upon it, struck, like a new coin fresh from the Mint. One smart, heavy blow of a perfectly bright die brings out the device and inscription in bold relief, without the slightest injury to the plating or the polish. The making of shell or hollow buttons, such as are worn by private soldiers and police, is also curious, as showing the various ingenious ways in which ductile metals may be manipulated; but this we shall have an opportunity of noticing in the manufacture of *covered* buttons, to which we now proceed.

The first covered buttons made by machinery seem to have been introduced by a gentleman who was driven into trade through having lost a fortune at the bombardment of Copenhagen by Lord Nelson. He first made a cloth button with an iron shank; but this

was subsequently, and by many steps, improved into the neat and elegant Florentine button which we wear to this day. I am afraid to say how many patents have been taken out for this apparently insignificant article, or how many lawsuits it has given occasion for. The great profits of the trade induced piracies innumerable. Nearly all the fancy varieties that were in vogue thirty years ago have disappeared; but at that time buttons covered with figured silk and velvet were all the rage. In London alone sixty looms were constantly employed in weaving the material. There is still a steady, quiet trade done in plain coat-buttons. Among modern inventions in this line, the neat, cheap, and useful white linen button claims especial notice; and it will serve as a convenient example of its class, to give us an idea of how such buttons are made. Every housewife prizes it as the handiest for all underclothing purposes. The original of this was our grandmothers' old thread button, which used to be made of threads passed over a ring, and gathered in the centre; but the new button is better-looking and stronger, and more like a product of mechanical art. Now, if we try to dissect one of these buttons, we shall find the skeleton of it to be a brass ring, not made of solid metal, but of very fine tube. Round what we may call the under side of the ring, the edges of this tube meet, and enclose between them, with a desperate grip, just the least bit of the margin of the linen covering, which has evidently been stretched over and tucked in. The question is, how was it got into that position, and the tube closed upon it? Well, the tube is an endless one, and it has been made out of a flat disc of sheet brass. The middle has been cut out with a press, leaving it the shape of a photographer's diaphragm; and this annular rim has been guttered, bent over, and closed up, with wonderfully ingenious tools, at the same time that two discs of fair white linen (one large, and the other small, to form the upper and the under side of the button) are presented to it to be tucked in. With what precision all this is done, any one can convince himself by merely looking at a finished button; but as for the *modus operandi*, it would seem to a spectator watching it that a conjurer's trick would be easier of detection. A girl's nimble fingers put the pieces together in a sort of trap, another girl gives the trap one little squeeze under a press, and, presto! the thing is done. One pair of workers will make buttons almost as fast as they can be counted. This is something like the method of making all kinds of covered buttons; the ductile metal is squeezed and tortured into the form most convenient for giving shape to the button, and at the same time for holding firmly in its place the woven covering.

Here is another and a widely different class, made of the beautiful shell of the pearl oyster. Familiar to all our bosoms, the modest little shirt-button reposes quietly unnoticed on its bed of cambric; but what a romance it could unfold, if it could only tell us of its old home among the shark-guarded treasures of the vasty deep! There was a boy's book that was my companion many years ago, that told of the way in

which these shells were fished up. Native divers were lowered from ships' sides by ropes, with great stones slung to their feet; and they groped about at the bottom of the sea for the precious bivalves, with which they filled the bags that were hung to their necks. They could remain an astonishingly long time under water—I believe the book said ten or twelve minutes—and as each man filled his bag, he cast off the stones from his feet, gave a pull at his rope as a signal, and was drawn up—thankful if the sharks had left him entire. There was a picture of one poor black fellow being hoisted in the slings, whose leg had been bitten off; and to this day the sight of a pearl button brings that picture to my remembrance. Whether it was the pearl fishery of the Pacific, or that of the East Indies, or that of the Red Sea that was so described, I cannot now recall; but the material of our shirt-buttons comes from all those places, and from some others besides. Not with any such vulgar object as shirt-buttons, though, were those first expeditions fitted out, or those lives imperilled. No; the search was for the coveted pearl—found very rarely indeed, but found sometimes of such great price, that any shell might contain a fortune. Doubtless the barren shells were cast back contemptuously to the fishes, till modern industry found a use for them, and gave to them a commercial value far exceeding that conferred upon them by their Orient treasures.

The best shells for the pearl-button-maker—the clearest and purest in grain—were those from Macassar; but another variety came from the Archipelago of the Pacific, which were at one time highly prized, and about which there hangs a little trade romance. These shells were of a black shade, full of beautiful iridescent tints infinitely varied. Round the edges they shaded off into yellow and white, and from these parts only were buttons cut, the rest being thrown away as waste. By-and-by, fashion discovered that black pearl was a lovely material, and thereupon many long-forgotten mounds of rubbish became mines of wealth. Every plot of waste ground in the vicinity of Birmingham was prospected for pearl, and many a rush was made to newly-found diggings. Some canny adventurers who lighted upon unexpectedly rich deposits worked them secretly in the dead of night.

Tons of the material had been buried in the foundations of buildings, and there was for long a tradition that it would pay to pull down one or two of the largest churches, for the sake of the black pearl that was supposed to be under them.

The mutations of taste, and the growing scarcity of the material, caused black pearl to be superseded by the new substance called vegetable ivory. It is a species of nut, growing in clusters on a tree something like a palm, in Central America. Stripped of the outer husk, the nuts are somewhat the shape of chestnuts, only five or six times as big; and all but a small core in the middle is a solid, hard, white substance resembling ivory. It can be sawn into slices and turned in a lathe to any form very easily; and though it loses its own creamy whiteness by exposure, it may be stained to any colour, and will retain it. No material yet introduced into the button trade is capable of such protean variety, either of shape or tint; and therefore it has been found specially suitable for the style of dress now in vogue, and is a universal favourite.

And thus each button has its own little history, if we could only stop to read it. Of all the innumerable varieties of buttons, made of almost every substance in Nature's great storehouse, there is scarcely one of which some interesting fact might not be quoted. Reader, do not despise them—do not boast of having a soul above buttons! Ours is in many respects a day of small things, and sometimes the smallest things, in their near and remote consequences, have an influence upon us that we little dream of. In connection with buttons there are many questions regarding child-labour, the employment of women, foreign competition, and other questions of like import, specially brought to the front. A commodity that is in universal demand, is simple in manufacture, and must be cheap, is often the agent of grinding misery to thousands. Factory Acts, and the influence of education, have brought about a healthier condition of things than formerly; but there was a time when it might have been said to the careless users of such trifles—paraphrasing the immortal words of Hood—

"They are not buttons you fling away,
But little children's lives."

CHARLES HIBBS.

