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BESSBROOK
AND
ITS LINEN MILLS.

A
SHORT NARRATIVE
OF
A MODEL TEMPERANCE TOWN.

BY
J. EWING RITCHIE.

AUTHOR OF "THE RELIGIOUS LIFE OF LONDON;" "NIGHT SIDE OF LONDON," ETC. ETC.

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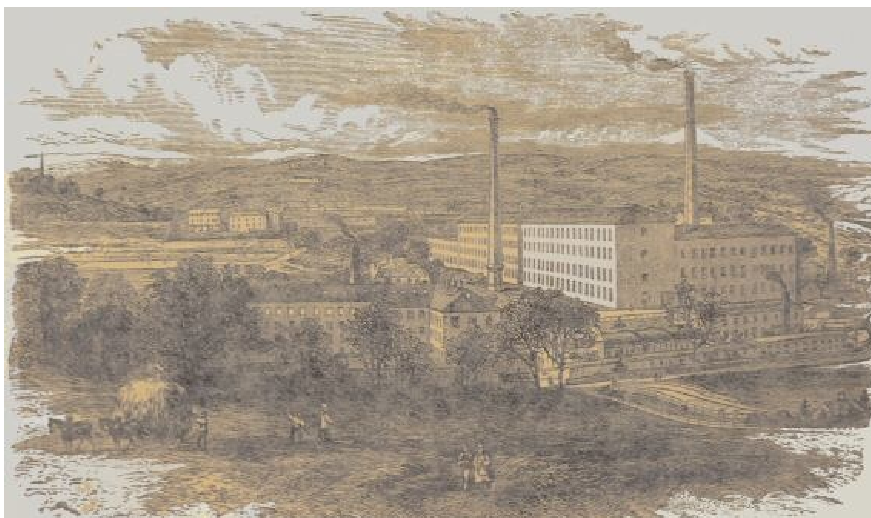

BESSBROOK AND ITS LINEN MILLS.

p. 5

That the times in which we live are out of joint is a truism too obvious to require comment. As much now as in old days the cry is, "Who will show us any good?" We hear much of modern progress; but there are many who, like Mr. Froude, intimate that what we call progress is in reality merely change, and that change is not necessarily always for the better. When such men as Mr. Ruskin leave the domain of the beautiful fiercely to arraign what in our wisdom, or want of it, we term Political Economy and its pitiless laws, we may be sure that all the social problems of the age have not been satisfactorily solved. If it be true that our rich men are becoming richer every day, it is equally true that our poor are becoming poorer. Might has taken from the peasant his strip of land, and has driven him into the towns, where he dies of bad air, bad water, bad food, bad lodging, bad pay; where his sons learn crime, and his daughters how much better rewarded is vice than virtue. Underneath the whited sepulchres of our boasted civilisation there lie rottenness and dead men's bones. Of talk we have somewhat more than enough, as must necessarily be the case now that woman claims to appear on the platform on an equality with man. Associations of all kinds exist partly for the bettering and partly for the bewildering of the p. 6 public. Money is freely subscribed for them; for Dives has a dim idea that he owes much to Lazarus, and would at all times rather discharge the debt by letting a few crumbs fall from the table, than by personally clothing his naked form and binding up his loathsome sores. It is not clear that we have improved on that very much. It is clear that for lack of it we have a great deal—especially in our crowded manufacturing districts—of social anarchy—of progress the wrong way—of licence which means licentiousness, of teaching and talking downward rather than upward. The need of silent divine action, as Thomas Carlyle writes, is very great at this time.

In Ireland, in one spot in particular, this silent divine action has now been in progress some twenty years, and the result is worth noting. I write of Mr. Richardson's Flax-spinning Mills at Bessbrook, a model town near Newry, and not far from the headquarters of Ireland's principal source of wealth, the linen trade.

A few words as to this trade may not be out of place here. The art of weaving is of great antiquity. In Ireland for many years attention has been paid to this branch of industry. Its linen manufacture has existed from the earliest period. In the reign of Charles I. the Earl of Strafford caused flax seed to be brought from Holland, and induced manufacturers from France and Holland to settle in the country. After the Restoration the trade was firmly established. From 1711 to 1832 it was placed under Government patronage. In former times the weaver was p. 7 superior in social status to most other workpeople, and he enjoyed special privileges. He was exempt, for instance, from serving on juries, and, except under peculiar circumstances, could not be forced to join the army. Many of the old Irish squires as well as the sons of landed chiefs were taught to weave, and even as late as the last century there were numbers of such weavers in Ulster. Indeed in that district everything was done that could be done to develop this important industry. During the long period of Lord Moira's residence at Montalto, he gave all possible encouragement to his tenants in stimulating the growth of flax. He had a dinner prepared every Thursday for the cloth buyers who attended Ballynahinch Market, and on these occasions we are told that his lordship sat at the head of the table and listened to the trade gossip about yard-wides and seven-eights, with all the zest of one who had become personally interested in the rise or fall of goods. In a similar spirit the Earl of Hillsborough, at that time a leading statesman, readily exercised his senatorial influence as well as his baronial power. Lord Hertford was also very friendly in every way where his aid could be of advantage. In 1765, when he held the office of Irish Viceroy, he obtained from the Linen Board many concessions in favour of the Northern

merchants, and his influence at Court was successfully used to obtain royal patronage for the Lisburn Damask works. A large lot of goods was specially got up for the royal table, the fame of this damask rapidly rose after the accomplishment of the royal order, and not only the leading p. 8 peers of Great Britain, but several of the Continental potentates, sent to Lisburn for their goods. In many ways public-spirited men sought to improve their machinery in order that they might be able to produce a better class of goods. About the time when James Quinn was stirring up the latent taste for the fanciful in damask-weaving and giving the people of Lurgan new ideas as to what could be accomplished in working patterns with the shuttle, James Bradshaw, the son of an independent landowner, who resided near Newtownards, was paying great attention to the diaper trade, then carried on in that town with considerable spirit, though at that time the Irish looms were beaten by those of Holland and the Continent. Mr. Bradshaw was determined to find out the secret of that superiority. As an amateur weaver, he had taken much interest in the improvement of weaving machinery, and seen its defects. One morning in 1728 he left his home in Ulster, and for two years afterwards no one of his family or friends knew anything of his whereabouts. Immediately after leaving home, he assumed the style of dress usually worn by weavers, and set out for Holland, but at the end of several weeks' travel by sea and land, he found himself, instead, in Hamburg, where he engaged with a diaper manufacturer, and at once commenced work. While so employed he paid the most diligent attention to all he saw, both as to the style of weaving, the fittings of looms, and the peculiar description of yarns chosen for certain classes of goods. All the time young Bradshaw remained in Hamburg he was obliged to keep up the garb and character of an ordinary workman, as such was the jealousy of the trade there, that p. 9 had it been known that he had merely come among them for the purpose of finding out the secret of the manufacture, his life might have fallen a sacrifice. At length, having mastered the details and gained ample experience of the practical department of diaper-making, he thought of returning home, which he did, by the aid of friends. In 1730, he arrived safely at Newtownards, a town which has since become famous as the Paisley of Ulster. Soon after his return, Mr. Bradshaw had looms constructed on the improved principle. He personally inspected the mode of fitting them up, and had all the gearing made on the plan so popular in Hamburg. The effect of all this was, we are told, to introduce a superior system of production, and to give life to the diaper trade, not only in Newtownards, but throughout other parts of Downshire.

Thus the linen trade flourished and became more important every year; of this importance Belfast may be considered as the outward and visible sign; every one knows that, in consequence of its being the seat of the linen trade, it has become the most prosperous town in Ireland. Its mills, factories, and docks, combine the commercial and mercantile features both of Liverpool and Manchester. Its situation is most picturesque—its streets are broad and uniform. Some of the linen-warehouses are palaces, and nowhere in the world are there finer buildings, more attractive shops, and greater symptoms of prosperity and wealth. It is not merely the seat of shipping, of commerce, of manufacture, but its intellectual claims are of no common character. It p. 10 calls itself the Irish Athens, and its colleges, and libraries, and newspapers, and general intelligence, bear out in some degree that claim. The linen trade of Ulster now represents a capital of several millions, and employs men, women, and children.

What has developed it to its enormous extent has been the application of steam. No longer the weaver sits in his isolated cottage. He is a hand in a mill, and weaving is a complex affair, requiring, to make it pay, gigantic operations and many hands. The factory system has many disadvantages, which tend to the mental, moral, and physical deterioration of the hands engaged in it. I write of one of the most successful efforts that has yet been made to free the factory of them, and to carry it on in a way advantageous, not only to the employer, but the employed. For these purposes it is necessary that the factory be an isolated one; that it should be a community by itself, an *imperium in imperio*, governed by its own laws, with its own special educational, religious, and philanthropic establishments; and that, above all things, it should be conducted on the principle, or rather practice, of total abstinence from all intoxicating drinks. I heard the Rev. Kegan Paul say at a temperance meeting, held in Exeter Hall this year, that in some parts of Dorsetshire, the county in which he resided, there were parishes with no public-houses in them, that in these parishes there were no paupers, that no cases came from them to the Petty-Sessions, and that the answer given by policeman, when asked by the magistrates whether he p. 11 had ever taken a teetotaller into custody, was "No." From many other districts in England, Scotland, and Ireland, a similar testimony reaches us. From all the judges of the land, from all our clergy, from all our prisons and penitentiaries—affirmation, mournful in its monotony, reminds us that drink is the bane of the working-man. This is confessed by all, whether they be temperance reformers or not. In many cases it is found that the higher the wages earned by the operative, the more drunken and dissipated are his habits. No fact has been more conclusively established. Where you shut up the public-house, the gin-palace and the beer-shop, you have less pauperism and crime, more honest, decent, sober living, than you have where these places are open. If this be true in England, where the people are more phlegmatic and less wild on politics and religion, it is trebly true of Ireland, where the people are supposed to be at all times too passionate and ready to take offence; where ages of political and religious partisanship have given to those passions an unnatural ferocity; and where the drop o' drink seems to be especially potent in its working. I have travelled in most parts of England, Scotland, and Europe, but I never felt in the slightest peril from the character of my travelling companions. I have been very little in Ireland, but the most disagreeable journeys I ever made were on Irish railways. In each case the disagreeableness arose entirely from the extent to which my fellow-passengers had indulged in the national drink. Perhaps we get it adulterated in England. If so, we have reason to be thankful. Its effects on the Irish are, for the time, truly demoniacal. I have never seen p. 12

people so maddened with drink as those of the sister isle. The temperate character of Bessbrook strikes you at once. There the difficult problem of carrying out a factory with the minimum of inevitable evil seems to have been satisfactorily solved.

Where is Bessbrook? The answer is, you pass it as you travel by rail from Belfast to Dublin, a little more than fifty miles from the latter, a little more than thirty from the former place—close to the Newry station on the main line. By day and night it is visible, and testifies afar-off the industry of which it is the source and centre. About half a mile to your right you can just discern its lofty chimneys and gigantic works. By night the place looks like a palace of glass, as the cheerful light, eloquent of labour and capital and intelligence, shines out of its thousand windows. We get out of the train, and ascend the road on our right. If it be daytime we shall have a pleasant walk. Behind us is Newry, or rather the valley in which it is seated, where its merchants and tradesmen sell and buy and get gain; and the river with its ships, which trade to Liverpool and all parts of our English coast. On our left and right are mountains and hills, well planted with white cottages and farmers’ houses, which look smilingly at us in the morning sun. The interiors, we admit, may be capable of improvement. Many of them are of the rudest kind, with the bare earth for the floor, with stone walls, whose sides internally are black with the smoke of the peat fire, which is painfully manifested to the unaccustomed and curious stranger who inquires within. The inhabitants are all small farmers. They grow flax and potatoes, keep a cow or a goat, and poultry and pigs, the sale of which is their living. As for themselves, they never touch such delicacies, and live chiefly on potatoes and Indian meal. They are very dirty. Muck of all kinds surrounds their dwellings, and yet they seem to thrive, and the shoeless, unwashed, ragged boys and girls you meet up there, have faces and figures you often seek in vain amongst more civilised people and in more comfortable homes. They have a hard time of it. In their dreary cabins wretchedness seems to reign supreme. At the outside, a couple of rooms comprise the whole extent of the building devoted to the human biped, and he is but little better lodged than his cow or pig—that is all. Nevertheless, you can’t get the tenant to abandon his holding, for which he pays to take possession a great deal more than you would think it really worth, the rent of which is often high, and is generally scraped together with much difficulty and after considerable delay. To be behindhand with the rent is no uncommon thing in these parts, and a stranger up yon hills is viewed with considerable suspicion. It can be no good that takes him up there—such is the firm belief of the natives. No power on earth is able to get them to give up their mountain freedom and frugal fare for better living elsewhere. Here, at least, the Irishman is too contented.

> “He sees his little lot the lot of all;
> Sees no contiguous palace rear its head
> To shame the meanness of his humble shed;
> No costly lords the sumptuous banquet deal
> To make him loathe his vegetable meal;
> But calm, and bred in ignorance and toil,
> Each wish, contracting, fits him to the toil.”

As we wend our way, a fine breeze meets us from the distant downs. You can fancy the sportsman may find on the distant heather something that may repay his toil, or the artist something he may love to transfer to his canvas; but you would never guess that in so romantic a spot there was so unpoetic a thing as a flax-spinning mill. On our right runs a little stream, which, ere it reaches its destination in Newry, sets more mills going, considering the distance, than any other in the country.

A turn in the road, and we are at Bessbrook Mills. As we descend we see the works in all their extent, and the rising slope beyond, on which is planted the town in which the workmen live. “What an admirable situation!” you exclaim; and truly you are right. No poisonous exhalations load the air; all seems cheerful and healthy. Here you see a picture of factory life without factory abominations. No policeman is required to keep order, for you see no public-house to create disorder. The head of the place is a teetotaller. Most of the leading men in the concern are the same. There is no law to compel the workpeople to be such, but most of them are so, and great is the comfort of the wives and families in consequence, as most people are fully aware of the fact that the worst thing a working-man can do with his money is to spend it in the gin-palace or the public-house.

What immediately strikes the stranger is the substantial and comfortable appearance of the mill and its surroundings. At Bessbrook each house consists of from three to five rooms, according to the size of the family occupying it. Every arrangement necessary to promote cleanliness and health is resorted to. As you pass up, some of the first buildings you come to are the schoolrooms, which are for girls and boys, and for lads in the evening who are engaged during the day. The infant-school attached is the most interesting feature; but you will be pleased with the clean appearance of the boys and girls—with their intelligence and readiness to learn. The staff of masters and mistresses employed is evidently superior. This school is on the Irish national system, that is, it is *undenominational*, and people need but examine the results of these schools to prove the real value of unsectarian education bringing all classes together, and trusting to the Sabbath schools for religious instruction. Every householder has to send his children there, or whether he sends them or not he is charged a penny for the schooling of each child. £100 is subscribed annually, I believe, by the mills, and there is, besides, a Government grant. The playground attached to the school is an extensive one, and the view from it very fine.

A few doors further on, and we come to the Dispensary. There are ills to which all flesh is heir, and to remove which the services of a medical man are required. In Ireland the county is divided into districts, and the services of a medical man are given gratuitously; but this is pauperism, and the hands at Bessbrook are not paupers. All here are expected to subscribe to a medical club, p. 16 and the Firm supplement the subscription with a handsome one of their own.

Thus a doctor is secured, who comes to his Dispensary on certain days of the week, and who also, of course, visits the serious cases in their own homes.

Further on, we come to a building which we ascertain to be the Temperance Hotel. This is the club and newsroom of the place. In the winter-time it is highly popular. Many Irish papers and a few English ones are taken in, and, I may add, most diligently perused. Here also are *Punch* and *Zozimus*, or the Dublin *Punch*. There also chess and draughts are played, and smoking is permitted. Boys are here indulging in games, while the advanced politician has his favourite organ—Conservative or Liberal; and those who care for neither, discuss matters connected with the neighbourhood, and the state of affairs at home. I may add, close to the mill itself is a large hall in which refreshments are provided at a cheap rate for those who come from a distance.

A little further on, and we come to a square, around which are workmen's houses, some of them really most eligible habitations, with a few shops at the end nearest us. One of them is a co-operative store; another is a milliner's shop, in which the latest fashions are as much sought after as in London; and then there is a butcher's shop, a baker's, a general shop, and a post-office. At right angles to the right of the principal street are two or three more streets, which also contain a shop or two; so that the good people at work here, if they have money to spare, can find little p. 17 difficulty in parting with it. A farm of 300 acres, belonging to the Firm, must also be noted, by means of which that real luxury, pure milk—a thing unknown in our great metropolis—is placed within the reach of all. There are allotments in which the householders work on a summer's evening, and at one end of the town are some better classes of houses, in which the gentlemen connected with the works or the estate—which belongs to the same proprietor—reside; just below these spreads out a picturesque sheet of water, which feeds the mill, and is here useful as well as ornamental. From thence the ground rises, and you get a good view of the surrounding hills. On one elevation, just before you enter the town, there is the Friends' Meeting-house, and a comfortable villa in which Mr. Richardson resides when he visits the place. Indeed, though he lives some fourteen miles off, he is not long absent from Bessbrook. He and his wife are perfectly cognisant of its wants, material and spiritual, and are ready to relieve them. They feel that it is a serious thing to have such a community under their care, they realise all the solemn responsibility of such a charge. Mr. Richardson, jun., who lives near the works, entertains similar ideas, and conducts the Sabbath-school—a very flourishing one, held in the schoolroom on a Sunday afternoon. A little way out of the town you may see, near one another, three very substantial-looking buildings—one is a Roman Catholic, one is a Presbyterian, and another is an Episcopalian place of worship. Let me add, that all these seem well attended, and that in Bessbrook there is peace and harmony; the rival sects rarely interfere with each other, because p. 18 the demon of strong drink inflames no root of bitterness, and fans no religious animosities into a fever heat.

I think I have now given an account of all the institutions of the place, with one exception—that of the Methodists, who meet in a temporary little hall, originally a photographic establishment. They are an infant cause as yet, but Mr. Richardson has recently granted a site for a place of worship for their accommodation. Such, then, are the institutions of Bessbrook. Let me repeat what they are—the school, the church, the dispensary, the shop, the reading-room, the mill. Let me add what they are not—the pawnbroker's, the leaving-shop, the ragged-school, the petty lodging-house to which tramps resort in all our large towns, the public-house, and consequent police-station. Does it now dawn on you, intelligent reader, why, in the opinion of many, Bessbrook is deemed worthy to be called a model town?

Let me now speak of its origin. The concern has been in active operation about a quarter of a century. An estate of six thousand acres belonging to an Irish nobleman was in the market, and it was purchased by Mr. John G. Richardson, a wealthy, intelligent, and public-spirited member of the Society of Friends, partly with a view, of course, to the productive use of his capital, and partly to give the operative class a chance of living and working under conditions favourable, and not, as is too generally the case, opposed, to their physical and moral welfare. On the estate, on a site admirably adapted for the purpose, Bessbrook is situated. There is a beautiful blue granite p. 19 found in one part of the estate, equal if not superior to that of Aberdeen as regards appearance and quality, which is gradually being introduced into England, where it needs but to be seen to be appreciated. It is now being used in the Manchester new Town Hall, and as it is better known we may expect to find it more largely in demand there. As at the mill, the same law holds good, that no public-house is to be tolerated. As a natural consequence, as I have already intimated, the police are unknown. All over the rest of Ireland you see them—wonderfully fine fellows, equal to any Prussians—the flower of the country—fully armed and ever active, as they may well be, for in Ireland there is little sympathy between the rulers and the ruled; even on the hills around Bessbrook the peasants illuminated when they heard of French successes, as if France was to come and fight on their behalf. There are public-houses around, and they bring with them the usual curses incident to such institutions among a people so excitable and passionate as the Irish. In Bessbrook, and in one or two other districts, the public-house is forbidden, and consequently the step of the policeman is never there heard. In its peaceful streets his martial figure is unknown. The operative has no fines to pay for being drunk and disorderly, and has no

occasion to pawn his Sunday clothes to procure a meal for his starving family. Teetotallers flourish. There is a Band of Hope with nearly nine hundred members, a Temperance Society, and a flourishing society of Good Templars as well; and occasionally lecturers come there from the head-quarters in Dublin; but the place itself teaches a lesson better than any of them, inasmuch p. 20 as Thomas Carlyle writes, "Silent divine action is better than any amount of speech or song," and in this point of view the example of Bessbrook cannot be too much dwelt upon or too widely proclaimed. As long as the workman drinks it is in vain that you try to elevate him. I am not speaking of drinking to excess. As wages are, the workman who is but a moderate drinker wastes money and time which, if better employed, would enable him to do better for his family and himself. At Bessbrook this is clearly felt; the men and women who come there have no desire to leave it—the mild despotism of a paternal government suits them. From the villages all round, even from as far as Newry, people come to work at the mills. Tuesday is the day when fresh hands are taken on, and great is the joy when an application receives an affirmative reply. The crowd round the door is the best possible test of the popularity of the place: you get a better idea of its magnitude when I tell you that it employs upwards of 4,000 hands, and that it pays away in wages as much as £50,000 a year. I have said there is little of that troublesome discontent which seems chronic in Ireland in and around Bessbrook. I might say more—I might testify to the existence and skill of the Volunteer Brass Band, which performs on public occasions, and whose services are in request even beyond Bessbrook itself. One great characteristic of the place is the sober and moral air of the people. In dense communities outside, you hear of scandals which are rare at Bessbrook; the superior education given, the absence of intoxicating liquor, have of p. 21 course much to do with this. But other agencies are at work. I refer in the first place to the family system initiated, or at any rate carried out here; the rule is to take on a whole family at a time. Here you have no young girls and lads at the most dangerous periods of their lives freed from parental control, and thrown uncared-for on the world. Where they are, we know too well what follows. Our great towns by night testify to the evils, moral and social, resulting from such a state of things. At Bessbrook the family is placed in one or other of the houses built for the operatives, and work is found for all. If the father cannot work in the mill, he is set to mend the roads, to work on the farm or at the quarries, to be a waggoner, or to make himself generally useful: and the services of such people are in request, as all the repairs of the mill-gear are done by workmen on the spot. There is no occasion to go out of the settlement for artificers of any kind. All the machinery of the place is set in motion by six engines consuming annually 10,000 tons of coal, which has all to be brought from Newry, and a water-turbine representing in all many hundred horse-power. It is clear, then, that paterfamilias will find plenty to do, and it is equally clear that the family living on temperance principles will be more decent, orderly, and comfortable than if the head of it frequented the public-house. I must say that as regards personal appearance, the Bessbrook mill-hand may challenge a comparison with any other mill-hands of a similar class. Some of the work I should fancy is not of the healthiest, at any rate there was a heat in some of the rooms, and a dusty condition of the atmosphere in others, not p. 22 very desirable, but the hands looked well nevertheless; and on a Sunday it is scarcely necessary to observe that they are got up in a style regardless of expense.

Another cause of the good condition of the place may be found in the reward given under certain conditions to the deserving and to the saving—habits induced by the establishment of a bank, depositors in which receive interest at the rate of five per cent. That the men appreciate the advantage of such an institution is clear, when I state that some of them are depositors to the extent of £300 or £400.

After all, that which mainly distinguishes Bessbrook from other places of the same kind, are the religious agencies constantly brought to bear. Mr. Richardson himself is, as is well known, a member of the Society of Friends, and he and his lady—who possess, I may be allowed to state, many admirable qualifications for such work—devote much of their time to the promotion amongst all of the Christian life: but all are free to worship as conscience dictates; Quakerism has no monopoly of the place; Roman Catholics and Protestants abound, and the result is, every operative, with his family, makes a point of attending some place of worship, and on a Sunday all the churches and chapels in the district are well filled. You don't see at Bessbrook what you may often see elsewhere—the intelligent and independent operative lounging about on a Sunday morning, ragged, unshaven, unwashed, a short pipe in his mouth, the penny radical newspaper in his pocket, an untaxed and ill-bred cur at his heels, waiting for the public to open and supply him p. 23 with his beloved and pernicious beer. Sunday is a busy day at Bessbrook. At an early hour the Roman Catholics may be seen going to mass, and then, as the day wears on, the general public are visible marching to one place of worship or another. Few, very few, stop away. All the boys and the men are at a place of worship—if the mothers, and the infirm and the sick, have to stop at home. I don't imagine they have got the millennium at Bessbrook, but I feel justified in saying that there people live in charity with each other, who, in other parts of Ireland, would be at work cracking each others' skulls. How is this? I reply, the secret is to be found in the temperance character of the place. People discuss without the stimulating influence of the national drink, and the result is they never come to blows. The nearest public-house, outside the estate, is called Sebastopol, on account of the fighting of which it is too often the centre.

There are many week-evening services in Bessbrook, including mothers' meetings and such-like gatherings; Mr. Richardson, with his wife, as I have already intimated, frequently leaves his beautiful seat at Moyallen personally to inspect the state, not merely of the mill as a commercial undertaking, but as an assemblage of men and women, and young persons and children, who have bodies to be cared for, and immortal souls to be saved. To help the backslider, to preserve the unfallen; to reclaim those who have; to relieve the sick and destitute; to visit the fatherless

and the widow in their affliction, is one part of a Christian man’s duty, faithfully remembered at Bessbrook. The aim and efforts of the principal are carried out by a devoted band of ladies and gentlemen connected with the place, and with the happiest results. I am told that in five years only three cases of misconduct have occurred. The discipline of the Roman Catholic Church of course prevents a great deal of mischief. If the priests do not marry themselves, they are great promoters of matrimony in other people. But, after all, they are not all Roman Catholics in Bessbrook—indeed, there, the followers of the old religion are rather in a minority.

Commercially, Bessbrook may be said to be of the first importance in the linen trade. The produce of its looms enjoys a world-wide reputation. Such confidence have buyers in them that, as a London gentleman remarked, “You may purchase them in the dark.” There is nothing inferior in the quality of the Bessbrook linen. It may be pronounced unsurpassed. What is manufactured there is sold to the trade, who put their own name to it, and export it to all parts of the world. The Spanish are customers, and so are the Americans. The warehouses of London and Belfast and Manchester are full of linen manufactured at Bessbrook. The public do not know the name, but the merchants and shippers do.

Bessbrook is placed in the centre of the flax-growing district of Ireland, and this is why the linen trade flourishes in that district. In 1829 the first flax mill was erected at Belfast, at an expense of nearly £30,000, which, however, in the course of a few years, was more than repaid. In 1855 it was calculated that no less than 500,000 spindles were at work, of which more than two-thirds p. 25 belong to Belfast, affording occupation to no less than 250,000 hands in the province. In addition to the flax grown all round, and bought in the country markets, it is imported from Belgium, France, or the Baltic, as different qualities are required.

The flax goes through many processes ere it becomes the snowy damask which adorns your dining-table, or the delicate fabric which, under the name of linen, ornaments your person. Even a towel—as you will see at Bessbrook—like Rome, was not made in a day; hence I may say the interior of the mill is more remarkable that its exterior, imposing and stately as that is. Outside you see the mere walls, the windows, the lofty chimney, and, at certain times, streams of men, women, and children, emerging from it, known in manufacturing districts as “hands.” Inside, you feel, directly you have passed the threshold, that you are in a magic scene of industry, with its long, long rooms, filled with wonderful machinery harmoniously working, requiring, in many cases, only the attendance of a child. By gaslight the scene is exhilarating. Far, far away is the power which sets all this machinery in motion, and on it works untiring and as if for ever. The flax, however, is not fit for spinning and weaving as it comes to Bessbrook. Even though it comes there in the scutched state, a great deal has to be done to sort it and purify it. It is no joke going into a scutching mill. The dust and noise are hideous. It is bad enough to see the men and boys hackling it at Bessbrook. This hackling consists of three processes—(1) *roughing*, performed by p. 26 roughers, in which the flax is passed over a course hackle, merely to take out dirt and tow, and leave the fibres straight; (2) *machine hackling*, performed by machinery, attended to by boys of from thirteen to sixteen, in which the flax is further hackled or combed out; (3) *sorting*, performed by men, who are called sorters or hacklers, whose business it is to hackle the flax as it comes from the machine, and to sort it in the different qualities. It is now ready for spinning, and is placed in a store until required.

The next process is spinning the flax into yarn, which process consists of two parts: (1) *preparing*, which is done by girls, technically termed preparers, back-minders, and rovers; and (2) *spinning*, which is done by female spinners. The yarn, when spun, is sent up to the reeling room to be reeled into hanks. This work is performed by reelers, also girls. The yarn is now ready for the market, with the exception of drying and bunching, which are carried on elsewhere.

We now ascend to the more important processes. For this purpose we enter a room where the atmosphere is uncomfortably warm, and the smell not the most agreeable. Here, men are at work, steeping the yarn in a mixture which is supposed to strengthen it, and the secret of which is generally pretty well kept. Men also are required for other purposes: the yarn is to be scoured or bleached, as the case may be, and then dried, and all this work is done by lads or men. As it is not all light and cheerful employment, most of the work is downstairs. Joyfully we ascend the big stone staircases and reach the upper air, where again we admire the beautiful order and the p. 27 exquisite machinery; and the neat appearance of the women and girls employed in this, which is the weaving factory—large, airy, and well lighted—excite our admiration. I must add, the place is not a little noisy, with the clack and click, and whirr and whizz, of no end of looms. Here the first thing done is to wind the yarn on spools for warp, and pirns for weft. As soon as this is done, the latter is ready for the shuttle; but the warp has yet to be wound by girls off the spools, and attached to the warpers’ beams. When this is done, it is taken into the dressing-room, and consigned to the care of men. Four warpers’ beams are then and there twisted into one thread, and that is the one which goes into the looms and which forms the basis, as it were, of the manufactured article. But the beam has to submit to another process ere it reach this consummation. It is again passed into female hands, who attach to it heddles, or healds, by which the warp is raised. Now nothing remains but to take it to the weaving shed, and attach it to the looms, where the yarn is transmogrified into plain linen, hollands, sheeting, damask, and towels. The manufacture of damask is exceedingly interesting. Patterns of great beauty are procured at much expense. In one part of the mill you come to a large room, in which the designers, male and female, are at work drawing designs, and adapting them to the requisite scale. The patterns are cut out in cardboard. At the top of the loom there is a wonderful apparatus of little hooks, which as the cardboard pattern slowly revolves, pull out the requisite p. 28

needles which do the bidding of the designer. You almost fancy fairy fingers must have worked these delicate designs. It is nothing of the kind. Machinery does it all. All that human intelligence has to do with the operation is, after the patterns have been secured in their proper places and machinery set at work, to see that the threads do not break, and that the uniform action of all be maintained. What leaves, and flowers, and garlands, are thus woven into the cloth! They are very proud of their damask at Bessbrook. No wonder at it. It is very beautiful, and has no superior in the trade.

In another part of the premises we find men at work at hand-looms, some of the beams of which are of immense breadth, and to move which requires the brawnier hands and firmer muscles of men. You, perhaps, wonder at this. Naturally the stranger expects the power-loom to have superseded the hand-loom. That it has done so, to a great extent, is evident from the most cursory inspection of Bessbrook, or any other weaving mill. Nevertheless, the fact remains that the very finest descriptions of linen are made with hand-looms. Why is this? you ask. Well, the answer is—and it is soon given—that the finest yarns would be quite unable to withstand the wear and tear of power-looms urged on by the resistless impetus of the water-turbine or the steam-engine. Ah, that machinery!—so delicate, so clean, so bright—can be very cruel! Be a little careless, a little wild, a little frolicsome, and an accident will occur in the twinkling of an eye. p. 29 A mill is a good schoolmaster. With its unerring action, with its inevitable laws, with its results, good or bad, immediately following on action, it is an epitome of the universe. Mill-hands ought to be a thinking, sober-minded people. At any rate, such they seemed to me at Bessbrook.

The success of Bessbrook implies something more than a fair interest for money invested. It means the advancement of the employed morally and socially. Bessbrook is not, as I have already said, a mere pecuniary speculation. It is a grand experiment, intended to show that not merely can the workman do without his drink, but that he is better without it; that factory life may be carried on under circumstances favourable to the training of the children, to the development of the young, to the comfort and happiness of the advanced in life. At Bessbrook this experiment is carried out on the largest scale—how large, the following facts will abundantly demonstrate.

It is calculated that the refuse of the place brings in an income of £1,200 a year. Of course in a flax mill there is waste. After the flax is hackled and sorted, a good deal of fluffy flax is rejected. It falls down on the floor; it flies about in the air. Well, this is all swept up and sold for what I have stated. Then, again, it must be remembered that Bessbrook is the name of the head concern, but that it gives a great deal of employment in the country around. For instance, a lovely walk under shady trees and by the side of a bustling little river, under the fine viaduct of the railway, which takes you, as the case may be, to Dublin or Belfast, and over one of the hills which glorify this part of the world, and you come to a place called Craigmore. p. 30 Well, there is a mill there, and the same process is carried on as at Bessbrook, only on a smaller scale. At Bessbrook there are 22,000 spindles at work, 500 power-looms, 60 hand. At Craigmore there are 100 power-looms, that is all. I have said this is the flax-growing country. Before the flax is fully ripe it is pulled up by the farmer, and left to dry in the field. After a day or two it is steeped in ponds, and then, when dried and scutched, taken to the market. All about the country there are scutch mills always at work. Nor is this all; the country is full of weavers, who work away all day at their hand-looms, lamenting probably the good old times before steam had altered the mode of linen manufacture—when the article in question was scarce—when wages were high, and linen only the luxury of the very rich. The old hand-looms remain, and people still get their living by working at them. As I have said already, under certain conditions it is necessary that they should remain. In the country round here there are 900 of such weavers who are employed in connection with the Bessbrook Mill.

Again, the size of the concern may be illustrated in another way. It employs altogether nearly 4,000 hands, including weavers, of which three-fourths are girls; girls, many of them would otherwise have to walk the streets in rags, or be thrown wild upon the towns, and add to their ever-increasing pauperism and degradation. About £200,000 worth of “raw material” is worked up at Bessbrook every year, and above £50,000 per annum paid away in wages. Few get any large portion; it passes away in small quantities to boys and girls. At Bessbrook the old proverb p. 31 is still true: “Happy is the man who hath his quiver full of children.”

The question is often asked, how are capital and labour to be reconciled? Bessbrook shows. In that mill there is no feeling of antagonistic interests. I believe once there was a difficulty, but that was political, and not industrial. The wild frenzy of Fenianism in its desolating course extended to Bessbrook, but it was only a passing visitation, and it left no trace behind. A year or two ago the writer was standing on the steam-boat pier at Seraing, where the Messrs. Cockerell have their grand works for the manufacture of rail-iron and steam-engines. One of the heads of departments was with me. “Had you been here last week,” said he, “you would have seen the soldiers here.” “Why?” said I. “Why,” was the answer, “we had a strike, and were obliged to call in the military.” Assuredly it is not pleasant for masters and men when the military are called in to keep peace between them. At Bessbrook not even the presence of a policeman can be detected; and as to soldiers, they are as rare as angels. In a land where discord runs high, where party passions are strong, where intemperance adds fuel to the flame of lawlessness, is not this saying a great deal? If some of our manufacturers and employers of labour would visit Bessbrook, I fancy they would not find their time thrown away. I commend it to the notice of our social reformers. Plans on paper are one thing, and in actual life another. It is well to evolve a good idea from one’s inner consciousness; it is better to see it, as at Bessbrook, successfully p. 32

carried out. A poet enthusiast would write glowingly of the place; I merely tell a plain unvarnished tale, and testify of what I seen and heard.

Since writing the above, I learn that in another part of Ireland the plan which Mr. Richardson has pursued has been carried out, and with great success. In the county of Tyrone there is a district upon which the liquor traffic is entirely prohibited. This district embraces an area of nine or ten miles, covering three great public roads, inhabited by a busy population of nearly 10,000. In that district it is conclusively established that there is a complete immunity from crime, and a poor-rate very much lower than that levied in surrounding districts. In Ireland, at any rate, these facts are being realised, and Irish M.P.'s in large numbers, especially in Ulster, help to swell the growing minority which demand that the people of a district may be freed, if they wish it, from the contamination of the beer-shop or the public-house.

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*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK BESSBROOK AND ITS LINEN MILLS: A SHORT NARRATIVE OF A MODEL TEMPERANCE TOWN ***

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