

"Ah me! what perils do environ  
The man who meddles with hot iron!"  
—Old rhyme.

A local patriarch lately told me he could well remember how, in

"The days when he went gipsying  
A long time ago."

he used to join the kindred spirits of his boyhood in blackberry hunting, down the hawthorn-scented lane, which led from Willenhall to Bilston. Rare times of rustic peace and beauty! What an Arcadia was Bilston then! Sunny meadows, purling brooks, woodland dells, rural homesteads, flower-bosomed cottages, sportive lambs, and singing birds—"these were thy charms, but all those charms are fled."

The route I took from Willenhall this morning is not usually recognised as the Queen's highway, but it afforded me the opportunity I desired of seeing some of the "waste lands of the Black Country," of which a good deal has been said of late in the local press. Leaving the Walsall and Wolverhampton turnpike-road to the right at Portobello, I proceeded to the rear of that classic spot, wondering as I went by what chance it came to be designated the "gate of war." Portobello is eminently a mining village, and the absence of the perpendicular in many of the houses testifies to the industrial zeal of its inhabitants. Some of the tenements I passed, not content with emulating the leaning tower of Pisa, have given evidence of internal dissolutions of partnership, and in more than one instance the front or side wall has completely disavowed all further connection with the main building. Indeed, to the uninitiated, the shattered state of the houses at the rear of Portobello would suggest the idea that an earthquake had visited the spot, and subjected the entire neighbourhood to a terrible convulsion. The village is not without one or two decent shops; and of its three Dissenting chapels, one—the Wesleyan—is a creditable building. A railway station and an antiquated turnpike bar complete the list of its public institutions.

Between Portobello and Bilston the landscape is varied by pit-mounds, "swags," engine houses, and intersecting tramways. Of the latter I may mention, as an evidence of local enterprise, that one recently completed by Messrs. Barker extends from Willenhall to Wolverhampton—a distance of nearly three miles—and is worked by locomotive engines. Many of the coal-pits in this locality seem to be exhausted, and others are, from various causes, only in partial operation. With one of these coalpits is associated a wild legend, which savours of the Black Country half a century ago. Once upon a time—so runs the tale—a queer-looking miner was employed in this particular coalpit, who, for want of a better title, went by the name of "Black Jack." He was a mystery to all who knew him. Instead of working in the day time with his comrades, he always chose to descend the shaft just before their day's work was over, and remain there all night quite alone. The work he performed was prodigious. In those twelve solitary hours he earned more money than any of his companions could earn in three days, and no one could understand "the reason why." One night, however, the secret oozed out. It had been previously arranged at the Green Dragon that some one should stealthily descend the shaft at midnight, and act as a spy. This was effectually done, and the scene that presented itself was startling in the extreme. There sat Jack, smoking his pipe with the utmost composure, surrounded by an innumerable army of little blue imps, who were all busily at work under his direction. The spy was aghast at such "an uncouth sight," and shrieked in terror. The sound of his voice reached Jack's ear, far up the dim passage of the mine, and he looked round in surprise. The spy instantly signalled to be drawn up, and had no sooner regained the top than a shower of stones, pickaxes, and lumps of coal, all mingled together and smelling strongly of sulphur, were hurled out at the mouth of the shaft in wild confusion. At daybreak, the miners descended as usual to their work, trying to appear as though nothing had happened, but on reaching the "sump" all disguise was thrown aside, for poor Jack lay quite dead, and half buried beneath a heap of shattered rock. A surveyor, who was sent to inspect the mine, reported that there had been an explosion of "fire damp," but the spy maintained that the eruption was caused by the imps, who, being discovered by an ordinary mortal, were released from the mystic spell that bound them, and revenged their long career of servitude by the utter annihilation of "Black Jack."

Midway between Portobello and Bilston is a slight eminence locally known as Banker's Hill, from the summit of which a wide view discloses hundreds of "broad acres," whose mineral wealth has been extracted, and which are now lying waste and desolate. Unfenced, unsmoothed, and uncared-for, these dreary tracts remind one of the famous "No Man's Land," described in the old romances. Considering that these acres of "spoil" have been proved capable of easy conversion into agricultural land of average quality, they certainly present a tempting field to enterprise, especially in this era of joint-stock speculation. From one of the highest mounds at Banker's Hill, the view of the surrounding landscape is particularly extensive, embracing Sedgely Beacon, Dudley Castle Hill, and the spires of Bilston, Darlaston, Wolverhampton, and other "neighbour towns."

Ten minutes' walk from Banker's Hill brought me to the Cold Lanes Gate, at the entrance to Bilston, and I forthwith commenced my tour of inspection in "the iron town."

It often occurs to me as being somewhat singular that Bilston should have been as famous for pigs in the early Saxon days, as in our own. There is, however, the slight difference that the products of ancient Swinesta—as the neighbourhood was then called—consisted of living swine, while those of the present day are pigs of iron.

"Which merchant-men do barter upon 'Ochange,"

The surroundings of Bilston give ample evidence of the character of its industry. Groups of black buildings, veiled in smoke, are conspicuous objects of the landscape, and their ceaseless din betrays the nature of their wonderful activity.

"—the ponderous hammer falls,  
Loud anvils ring amid the trembling walls,  
Stroke follows stroke, the sparkling ingot shines,  
Cold waves red flag, the lengthening bar refines,  
Cold waves immersed the glowing mass conceal,  
And turns to adamant the hissing steel."

It is somewhat ominous, that the most noticeable feature at the entrance to Bilston is a very spacious Police Court, and on the day of my visit an anxious group of men and women stood around the gate in such numbers as to suggest a second version of the famous picture, "Waiting for the Verdict." In connection with this establishment for the preservation of the peace is to be found one of those antiquated instruments of torture familiarly called "stocks," and within the past half-dozen years my curiosity has been gratified by seeing a delinquent doing penance in the orthodox fashion suggested by that time-honoured contrivance. Among the crowd of on-lookers I well recollect an old man, who, being reminded of the unwonted scene of his early days, related many curious recollections, in the way of punishment common to this district in the early part of the century. One of the most effective was, he said, that of tying the offender at the rear of a cart or wagon, and during the slow progress of the vehicle through the public streets, the populace had full license to labour the luckless knave to their hearts' content. Such a scene must have been almost as exciting as a badger bait to the "roughs" of the district in those palmy days.

The Parish Church of St. Leonard's is by no means an ancient structure, not having had an earlier existence than the year 1825; but a church has occupied the same pleasant site, at the entrance to the town, since the reign of Henry VI. From time to time it was endowed by private benevolence with "divers lands," but its revenue for many years was very small. At the ecclesiastical valuation in the year 1526, the Chantry of Bilston was estimated at £4. 19s. 10d. sterling. In 1767, Mr. Edward Best returned the income at £50. per annum; but since that time, the "black diamonds" under the church lands have been turned to such profitable account as to augment the income to about £600. per annum. The edifice which preceded the present structure was consecrated in the year 1753, several years after the old church had been taken down. During the long interval thus occupied in the rebuilding, the Prebendaries instituted some claim to

\* It was stated, a few years ago, that the production of iron in Bilston exceeded that of the whole of Sweden.

a participation in the patronage—then, as now, in the gift of the people—but they were unable to substantiate their right. The origin of the popular nomination is thus recorded in an old MS., still preserved in the registry at Windsor, having neither date nor title:—

"The curacy of Bilston is of so small a value (£4. a year) that the inhabitants contribute towards the maintenance of the curate, and upon this account pretend to a nomination, or approbation at least, otherwise they say they will raise no contributions."

This "popular" mode of election here, as at Willenhall, is the cause on each vacancy of a contest not unworthy of the scene in Tom Taylor's successful comedy. Never, perhaps, did party feeling run higher than in the year 1813, when Mr. Leigh—whose labours during the awful cholera visitation of 1832 were beyond all praise—was triumphantly elected. An old chronicle thus describes the "scene":—"A great noisy rabble thronged the streets, men, women, and children, all wearing the colours of the respective candidates, among whom Mr. Leigh seemed most popular, his colours being rightly the 'true blue.' When the voting was well nigh about to close, the mob got very excited, and cheered and hooted the voters as they listed. A few of the noisiest began stone-throwing, but this the constables stopped with all speed, and no great harm was done. Mr. Leigh was returned by a large majority, and his supporters testified their joy and merriment, by singing openly in the streets:—

"With grievous sticks and stones  
They sought to break our bones;  
They dragged the people near  
An' tempted them w' beer,  
And made them vote for fear,  
But see, boys, see!  
Who won the victory?  
We, boys, we!  
And Mr. William Leigh  
Shall our parson be, boys!  
Shall our parson be!"

Humphrey Perry—a great benefactor to the poor of Bilston—bequeathed the parsonage house in the year 1716. The present Curate-in-charge is the Hon. and Rev. Adelbert Anson, M.A., brother of the Earl of Lichfield, Lord Lieutenant of the County.

In the reign of Edward III., the "men of Bilston" were certified to be "toll free," a privilege likewise accorded to the burgesses of Walsall. Bilston was also the site of a gallows and a gibbet during the 16th century, and for the latter instrument of torture "charities" were periodically invited at the Wolverhampton Collegiate Church.

Leaving the Old Church, and passing down the main street, my attention was directed to the head office of the Staffordshire Joint-Stock Bank, of which the architecture ill accords with the notable success it has achieved. Across the way—hard by the very modest-looking Post Office—is a handsome drinking fountain, lately erected by Mr. Mason, a solicitor of this town, in memory of his late wife. It is at once a beautiful and useful tribute of well-deserved affection. Past the spacious establishment of the Dudley and West Bromwich Bank, is the large and well-looking Wesleyan Chapel, the scene of the labours of the Rev. H. W. Holland—of *Cornhill* celebrity—the Rev. R. Gardner Smith, and other local ornaments of that religious community. Within a stone's throw—down Oxford Street—is the chapel of the Independents, where until recently, the Rev. J. W. Bain

"Allured to brighter worlds and led the way."

From this new and goodly edifice, a bye street brought me to the Great Western Railway Station, which is eminently characteristic of the company. Much more room than traffic is its leading feature, although—unlike some of the stations on that line—we cannot describe it (as Artemus Ward described the Abbeys of England), as being "sadly out of repair."

Hard by the Railway Station is the establishment of the Public Baths Company (Limited), an institution which, although far from paying cent. per cent., has been of considerable service to the locality, in the work of purifying the "great unwashed." The unfortunate shareholders have hitherto received no exchange for the "calls" made upon them, save the consciousness of what Tennyson would call "a duty done," and we cannot help thinking that Town Commissioners should relieve them now of the responsibility incurred in their well-advised attempt to place within the reach of their poorer brethren the power of obeying the injunction given to them as to Naaman, "Wash and be clean."

Turning down Wood Street, I passed the Baptist Chapel, of which the Rev. T. Jackson is the officiating minister. It may not be generally known that Mr. Jackson is a brother-in-law of the Rev. C. H. Spurgeon, having married a sister of that eminent divine. This lady I was fortunate enough to meet. The family likeness is unmistakable, and the Bilston people of all creeds and sects "esteem her very highly in love for her works' sake."

Church Street is not particularly ecclesiastic in its general appearance, especially on a Saturday night, when "market people most do congregate." It is emphatically a street of liquor vaults, where those "kindred spirits," rum, gin, and brandy, are disposed of in plentiful potations. I am not acquainted with another thoroughfare in the whole district which can vie with this in the number of such establishments. In respect of the influence exerted by these "institutions," however, Bilston is decidedly improving, and no such scenes are now to be witnessed as were, unhappily, too common thirty years ago, when the excited crowds, even on a Sabbath evening, too often suggested Burns's profane couplet:—

"Some are full of love divine,  
And some are full o' brandy."

The market place is spacious and convenient, being railed off from the main street so as to prevent any interruption to the traffic on the part of itinerant vendors, as is the case with most of the other district towns. Adjoining the market is a building, of primitive construction, which claims the somewhat dignified name of "Theatre Royal." It is, however, no very powerful rival to the Haymarket or Drury Lane. The patrons of the Drama who most frequent it are not severely classical in their tastes, if one may judge by the experience of a single night. Although crowded from floor to ceiling, the sublime tragedy of "Hamlet" failed to elicit many tears, and even the *Ghost*—a wretched imitation—was unable to excite the usual alarm. But when the "screaming farce" came on, in which the *Clown* had to swallow a string of sausages, the applause became uproarious, both in pit and gallery, and was continued for some time after the curtain fell.

A respectable Temperance Hall, to which I was invited, preserves Bilston from the obloquy of having no adequate public room, although the town might still emulate with advantage the public spirit of Willenhall, in the erection of a Mechanics' Institution.

Bilston is fortunate in possessing three railway stations, two of which, however, are what Sir Roger de Coverley would say "more in name than in nature." One—the West Midland—is about the poorest apology for a station to be found in the whole district, and the approach to it even eclipses that to the Low Level at Wolverhampton. The other—on the North-Western line—is at Ettingshall Road, a dreary centre of mining industry. This triple communication is, however, of great commercial importance to Bilston, and will doubtless tend to localise the more permanent trades on which the future prosperity of the Black Country so greatly depends.

Bilston already emulates its busy prototype, Wolverhampton, in the production of japanned and tinned wares, and stepping into the large establishment of Mr. John Marston, in Lester Street, I was shown an immense variety of household articles, "all of beauty, all of use," for the production of which the town is rapidly rising into fame. Painted snuffer trays, cash boxes, baths—foot, hip, and lounging—trays, waiters, caddies, snuff boxes, coal vases, letter racks, coffee pots, and an endless variety of a housewife's requisites, constitute the "long array" of Bilston wares. Mr. Marston rather astonished me by saying that in his attempt to gratify the diversity of fine art taste, he had not less than 1,700 distinct patterns of trays and waiters! What a field is here for the development of art in conjunction with handicraft! The eloquence of Ruskin and the shrewd counsel of Professor Dresser might well be employed in recommending to the people of Bilston more attention to the cultivation of refined taste among the workpeople, as a powerful aid to the future welfare of their town. If, as the poet sings,

"In the elder days of art  
Builders wrought with curious care  
Each minute and unseen part,  
For the gods see every where,"

there is surely equal reason now for recognising the moral influence of handicraft as there was in the middle ages, when Art achieved such triumphs in the progress of industrial enterprise. As a thoughtful writer has well expressed it:—"If, as time advances, we are to experience increasingly severe competition from new and unexpected quarters, how are we to combat it, and how hold our own against the world, but by the careful fostering of inventive genius, the conservation of a pure morality, and increased attention to all that can render our workpeople more capable work-producing creatures?"

This query especially applies to Bilston, and we leave its solution in the hands of those who have at heart the moral and material welfare of the parish.