
A Paper-Mill

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Down at Dartford in Kent, on a fine bright day, I strolled through the pleasant green lanes, on my way to a Paper-Mill. Accustomed, mainly, to associate Dartford with Gunpowder Mills, and formidable tin canisters, illustrated in copperplate, with the outpourings of a generous cornucopia of dead game, I found it pleasant to think, on a summer morning when all living creatures were enjoying life, that it was only paper in my mind – not powder.

If sturdy Wat Tyler,1 of this very town of Dartford in Kent (Deptford had the honour of him once, but that was a mistake) could only have anticipated and reversed the precept of the pious Orange-Lodges,2 if he could only have put his trust in Providence, and kept his paper damp3 – for printing – he need never have marched to London, the captain of a hundred thousand men, and summarily beheaded the archbishop of Canterbury as a bad adviser of the young king, Richard. Then, would William Walworth, Lord Mayor of London (and an obsequious courtier enough, may be) never have struck him from his charger, unawares. Then, might the “general enfranchisement of all bondmen” – the bold smith’s demand – have come, a long time sooner than it did. Then, might working-men have maintained the decency and honour of their daughters, through many a hazy score of troubled and oppressive years, when they were yet as the clods of the valley, broken by the ploughshare, worried by the harrow. But, in those days, paper and printing for the people were not; so, Wat lay low in Smithfield, and Heaven knows what became of his daughter, and the old ferocious wheel went driving round, some centuries longer.

The wild flowers were blowing in these Dartford hedges, all those many summer-times; the larks were singing, high in air; the trees were rustling as they rustle to-day; the bees went humming by; the light clouds cast their
shadows on the verdant fields. The pleasant little river Darent ran the same
course; sparkled in the same sun; had, then as now, its tiny circles made by
insects; and its plumps and plashes, made by fish. But, the river has changed,
since Wat the Blacksmith, bending over with his bucket, saw his grimey
face, impatient of unjust and grievous tribute, making remonstrance with
him for his long endurance. Now, there are indeed books in the running
brooks⁴ — for they go to feed the Paper-Mill.

Time was, in the old Saxon days, when there stood a Mill here, “held
in ferm by a Reve,” but that was not a Paper-Mill. Then, came a Nunnery,
with kings’ fair daughters in it; then, a Palace; then, Queen Elizabeth, in
her sixteenth year, to sojourn at the Palace two days; then, in that reign, a
Paper-Mill. In the church yonder, hidden behind the trees, with many rooks
discouraging in their lofty houses between me and it, is the tomb of Sir John
Spelman,⁵ jeweller to the Queen when she had grown to be a dame of a
shrewd temper, aged fifty or so: who “built a Paper-Mill for the making of
writing-paper,” and to whom his Royal Mistress was pleased to grant a
licence “for the sole gathering for ten years of all rags, &c., necessary for
the making of such paper.” There is a legend that the same Sir John, in
coming here from Germany, to build his Mill, did bring with him two
young lime-trees — then unknown in England — which he set before his
Dartford dwelling-house, and which did flourish exceedingly; so, that they
fanned him with their shadows, when he lay asleep in the upper story, an
ancient gentleman. Now, God rest the soul of Sir John Spelman, for the
love of all the sweet-smelling lime-trees that have ever greeted me in the
land, and all the writing-paper I have ever blotted!

But, as I turn down by the hawthorn hedge into the valley, a sound
comes in my ears — like the murmuring and throbbing of a mighty giant,
labouring hard — that would have unbraced all the Saxon bows, and shaken
all the heads off Temple Bar and London Bridge, ever lifted to those heights
from the always butchering, always craving, never sufficiently-to-be-
regretted, brave old English Block. It is the noise of the Steam Engine. And
now, before me, white and clean without, and radiant in the sun, with the
sweet clear river tumbling merrily down to kiss it, and help in the work it
does, is the Paper-Mill I have come to see!

It is like the Mill of the child’s story,⁶ that ground old people young.
Paper! White, pure, spick and span new paper, with that fresh smell which
takes us back to school and school-books; can it ever come from rags like
these? Is it from such bales of dusty rags, native and foreign, of every
colour and of every kind, as now environ us, shutting out the summer air
and putting cotton into our summer ears, that virgin paper, to be written
on, and printed on, proceeds? We shall see presently. Enough to consider, at present, what a grave of dress this rag-store is; what a lesson of vanity it preaches. The coarse blouse of the Flemish labourer, and the fine cambric of the Parisian lady, the court dress of the Austrian jailer, and the miserable garb of the Italian peasant; the woollen petticoat of the Bavarian girl, the linen head-dress of the Neapolitan woman, the priest’s vestment, the player’s robe, the Cardinal’s hat, and the ploughman’s nightcap; all dwindle down to this, and bring their littleness or greatness in fractional portions here. As it is with the worm, it shall be with the wearers; but there shall be no dust in our eyes then, though there is plenty now. Not all the great ones of the earth will raise a grain of it, and nothing but the Truth will be.

My conductor leads the way into another room. I am to go, as the rags go, regularly and systematically through the Mill. I am to suppose myself a bale of rags. I am rags.

Here, in another room, are some three-score women at little tables, each with an awful scythe-shaped knife standing erect upon it, and looking like the veritable tooth of time. I am distributed among these women, and worried into smaller shreds—torn cross-wise at the knives. Already I begin to lose something of my grosser nature. The room is filled with my finest dust, and, as gratings of me drop from the knives, they fall through the perforated surface of the tables into receptacles beneath. When I am small enough, I am bundled up, carried away in baskets, and stowed in immense bins, until they want me in the Boiling-Room.

The Boiling-Room has enormous cauldrons in it, each with its own big lid, hanging to the beams of the roof, and put on by machinery when it is full. It is a very clean place, “coddled” by much boiling, like a washerwoman’s fingers, and looks as if the kitchen of the Parish Union had gone into partnership with the Church Belfry. Here, I am pressed, and squeezed, and jammed, a dozen feet deep, I should think, into my own particular cauldron; where I simmer, boil, and stew, a long, long time. Then, I am a dense, tight mass, cut out in pieces like so much clay—very clean—faint as to my colour—greatly purified—and gradually becoming quite ethereal.

In this improved condition, I am taken to the Cutting-Room. I am very grateful to the clear fresh water, for the good it has done me; and I am glad to be put into some more of it, and subjected to the action of large rollers filled with transverse knives, revolving by steam power upon iron beds, which favour me with no fewer than two million cuts per minute, though, within the memory of man, the functions of this machine were performed by an ordinary pestle and mortar. Such a drumming and rattling, such a battering and clattering, such a delight in cutting and slashing, not even the
Austrian part of me ever witnessed before. This continues, to my great satisfaction, until I look like shaving lather; when I am run off into chambers underneath, to have my friend the water, from whom I am unwilling to be separated, drained out of me.

At this time, my colour is a light blue, if I have indigo in me, or a pale fawn, if I am rags from which the dyes have been expelled. As it is necessary to bleach the fawn-coloured pulp (the blue being used for paper of that tint), and as I am fawn-coloured pulp, I am placed in certain stone chambers, like catacombs, hermetically sealed, excepting the first compartment, which communicates with a gasometer containing manganese, vitriol, and salt. From these ingredients, a strong gas (not agreeable, I must say, to the sense of smell) is generated, and forced through all the chambers, each of which communicates with the other. These continue closed, if I remember right, some four-and-twenty hours, when a man opens them and takes to his heels immediately, to avoid the offensive gas that rushes out. After I have been aired a little, I am again conveyed (quite white now, and very spiritual indeed) to some more obliging rollers upstairs.

At it these grinders go, “Munch, munch, munch!” like the sailor’s wife in Macbeth, who had chestnuts in her lap. I look, at first, as if I were the most delicious curds and whey; presently, I find that I am changed to gruel — not thin oatmeal gruel, but rich, creamy, tempting, exalted gruel! As if I had been made from pears, which some voluptuous Mr. Emden had converted into groats!

And now, I am ready to undergo my last astounding transformation, and be made into paper by the machine. Oh what can I say of the wonderful machine, which receives me, at one end of a long room, gruel, and dismisses me at the other, paper!

Where is the subtle mind of this Leviathan lodged? It must be somewhere — in a cylinder, a pipe, a wheel — or how could it ever do with me the miracles it does! How could it receive me on a sheet of wire-gauze, in my gruel-form, and slide me on, gradually assuming consistency — gently becoming a little paper-like, a little more, a little more still, very paper-like, indeed — clinging to wet blankets, holding tight by other surfaces, smoothly ascending Witney hills, lightly coming down into a woolly open country, easily rolling over and under a planetary system of heated cylinders, large and small, and ever growing, as I proceed, stronger and more paper-like! How does the power that fights the wintry waves on the Atlantic, and cuts and drills adamantine slabs of metal like cheese, how does it draw me out, when I am frailest and most liable to tear, so tenderly and delicately, that a woman’s hand — no, even though I were a man, very ill and helpless, and
No Schedule of Exercise, and that its names are love, forbearance, mercy, progress, scorn of the Hydra Cant with all its million heads!

So, back by the green lanes, and the old Priory - a farm now, and none the worse for that - and away among the lime-trees, thinking of Sir John.