



TAPESTRY AT HIGH HOUSE.

TO FACE P. 115.

ART IX.—*A Panel of Tapestry at High House, Hawkshead.*  
By H. S. COWPER, F.S.A.

*Communicated at Carlisle, April 19th, 1904.*

ALTHOUGH examples of tapestry exist in considerable numbers in our old English homes, I am not aware that any pieces of local interest have ever been described or illustrated in these *Transactions*: and possibly an interesting and useful paper on the subject might be put together by some member who has the leisure. The panel I shall describe is in my possession, having been purchased by me some years ago at a sale at Furness Abbey Hotel, when a considerable collection of china, old furniture and miscellaneous curiosities, belonging to the Misses Rainsford was dispersed.

The piece of tapestry in its present condition measures 7 feet in height and 11½ feet in width, but there has been an ornamental border most of which has gone. The material seems principally but perhaps not entirely wool. The subject for a considerable time puzzled me very much, since the sun, moon, stars and sheaves of corn were so faded and obliterated by dust as to be practically invisible. As it was being cleaned these appeared, and a lady friend at once identified the subject as Joseph's dream. Other difficulties then arose about the number of figures in the subject, and these were only solved by a very careful examination, which satisfied me that the panel represents not one, but two or perhaps three scenes in the same scriptural drama.

The large-sized figures which occupy so much of the space of the whole panel represent Joseph in the act of telling his dream. In the middle is Joseph himself (at that time 17 years old), staff in hand, and dressed in a short tunic, with a wallet slung around him. Three figures are before him, the largest and most imposing being evidently

his mother Rachel, while the male figure immediately behind her must be Jacob to whom Joseph is actually described as relating the dream. Behind Joseph are four standing male figures, apparently engaged in hot altercation, and one seated and placid figure. These must be the four sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, namely Dan, Naphthali, Gad and Asher, while either the seated figure or the man behind Jacob may be Reuben—though this leaves still one figure to be explained, since in the account in Genesis, there is nothing from which we are to infer that any other of the brothers were present at the telling of the dream.

There is one seeming difficulty which however may be thus explained. According to Bible chronology Joseph was born 1745 B.C., Rachel died 1732 B.C. and the dream took place 1729 B.C., so that Rachel had been dead three years. The text, however, in the book of Genesis\* must therefore be understood to mean that Rachel was still with her husband in spirit; but no doubt on account of its wording, the artist has actually represented Rachel as one of the principal figures in the scene.

The next scene is comprised in the group of figures nearly above Joseph's head. Six brothers are standing in or near a pit, which is indicated by the dark curved outline in which they stand: and one of the brothers is actually shown in the act of slaying, apparently with a knife, the kid in the blood of which the coat of Joseph was to be dipped (Gen. xxxvii, 29-31).

The background shews four big trees, a city with gates, walls and towers, shrubs, a flock of sheep grazing, and distant hills. The dream itself apparently took place in the neighbourhood of the town of Shechem since it is stated (Gen. xxxvii, 2) that the brethren were feeding their flock, and, immediately following the account of the

---

\* "And he told it to his father and to his brethren: and his father rebuked him, and said unto him, What is this dream that thou has dreamed? Shall I and thy mother and thy brethren indeed come to bow down ourselves to thee to the earth." Genesis, xxxvii., 10.

dream, we are told that they went to shepherd at Shechem.\* The pit incident was at Dothan, which is about 20 miles north of Shechem. It is therefore quite possible that the landscape is meant to do duty for both of these towns.

Much of the space between the figures and below their feet is liberally sprinkled with plants, flowers and herbage, intended as an indication of the pastoral character of the scene of the drama. In the sky, and between the two central trees, is portrayed the dream itself—the sun, five stars, the moon and nine sheaves of corn in a circle round a central one. The sheep are correctly represented as the big tailed oriental breed, but the costume of the figures is a curious mixture of the European and oriental styles, the last being indicated chiefly by the turban-like head dress of some of the brethren.

This disposes of the subject, but a few words may be said about the history, style and condition of the tapestry.

When my purchase arrived at home, it was found full of dirt, and suffering a good deal from moth. Careful cleaning got rid of the latter, but failed to restore the colouring, which is very faded; for although the various tints of green which predominate are fairly well preserved, most of the flesh tints and reds have turned to colourless greys and drabs. When the hammer fell at the auction, I had no idea of its recent history, but enquiry elicited the information that it was originally part of the Sizergh tapestry, and this information I have every reason to believe is correct. I do not however know any printed record that a tapestry series of the "Story of Joseph" was ever at Sizergh, or that any odd panels of such a series exist there at the present time.

Again although there seems at one time to have been a good deal of tapestry at Sizergh, very little precise information on the subject is available. The accepted theory is apparently that all or most if it was either brought or

---

\* "And his brethren went to feed their father's flock in Shechem." v. 12.

sent home by Thomas Strickland (son of Walter Strickland of Sizergh) who was Bishop of Namur and Ambassador to England from the Emperor Charles VI. The date of his death is given as 1740 or 1743, at Namur. The date of my panel is however considerably earlier than this, the style of work, treatment and costume, proving it to have been made at the end of the sixteenth or beginning of the seventeenth century. A friend of mine (Mr. W. Harding Smith) shewed my photograph to Sir C. Purdon Clarke, of the South Kensington Museum, who said it appeared to be Flemish, but that it might be an English (Mortlake Factory) copy of a Flemish design.\* There does not therefore appear to be anything in its character which would not fit in with the current tradition that Bishop Strickland brought or sent the Sizergh tapestry to Westmorland. †

The illustration is from a photograph, over which I have spent a considerable time touching with the brush to bring out the detail. It will be observed however that in it only five stars, half the moon, and six sheaves are visible. The reason is as follows. The photograph was made some time back by a friend, and as, in consequence of the size of the tapestry, it proved impossible to get the camera quite in front, some distortion was the result. It was thought that this might be corrected by re-photographing the print, but the maker of the block effected it instead by cutting a slip off the top of the photograph, and then relaying the border. A portion of the subject is therefore lost, the proportions a little altered, and the town has a slope up to the right. Some parts of the costume also have come out much lighter than they actually appear: the lightest colour being a sort of Khaki.

---

\* There are no manufactory marks on it. If, as I imagine, there was a wider ornamental margin, these may have been cut away.

† Dr. M. W. Taylor in these *Transactions* (x. 35), mentions the "Story of Alexander," and says the Sizergh tapestry was Beauvais work. Mr. Curwen in the same volume says it came from the Bishop's Palace at Namur. Lady E. Strickland in her "Sizergh Castle" (1898), alludes to the "Story of Anthony and Cleopatra" as now hanging in the Inlaid room.