

Tapestry at Renishaw Hall.

By REV. C. KERRY.



OME of the finest and largest tapestry hangings in Derbyshire are to be found in the stately rooms at Renishaw, the seat of Sir George Reresby Sitwell, Bart.

The principal suite consists of five hangings, of which three are suspended in the great Drawing Room, and the other two in the Ball Room. These are traditionally said to represent the "Triumph of Solomon," and to have been purchased in France by Sir Sitwell Sitwell when he was making the "grand tour" about a hundred years ago. He left Christ Church, Oxford, in December, 1789, or January, 1790, and, according to tradition, travelled abroad before his marriage in the summer of 1791. The whole of these hangings, which were probably placed in their present position on the completion of the great Drawing Room in 1803, were executed in the seventeenth century, at the *atelier* of Judoc de Vos, of Brussels, as may be seen by his name and mark on the lower sinister margins of the several pieces. The texture is singularly fine, there being no less than nineteen threads of the warp, and forty-eight threads of woof in one square inch of surface; an unmistakable proof of the infinite labour bestowed on this example. The seven magnificent hangings in the Queen's Gallery at Hampton Court, representing the History of Alexander from the cartoons of Le Brun, Louis XIV.'s minister of art, were woven by the same tapisier. Sir George Sitwell believes that the Renishaw

tapestry is also from the designs of Le Brun, for the backgrounds and figures are French, and both the composition and the colouring suggest the hand of a great master. The de Vos family had long been established as tapestry weavers at Brussels. In the beginning of the seventeenth century the firms at Brussels included upwards of one hundred masters. As time passed by, the manufacture tended to become concentrated in the hands of a few families, who formed positive dynasties, and amongst these may be cited the family of de Vos. In the eighteenth century (writes Müntz in his *History of Tapistry*), Josse de Vos, of Brussels, executed a replica of "The Conquest of Tunis," which is now at the Imperial Palace of Schoenbrunn, near Vienna. The original, now at Madrid, was designed by Jan Vermeyen, and executed for Charles V.

In the Great Drawing Room we have:—

1. The Triumph of Peace, measuring 18 ft. 4 ins. in length by 11 ft. 9½ ins. in height. The central figure in the design represents Peace as a Queen enthroned beneath a canopy awning attached to the branches of a tree. The monarch's left hand is placed upon the model of a temple, beside which lie the emblems of Royalty and Episcopacy, and with her right she extends her sceptre to a figure trampling upon swords, shields, quivers, bows, and other accoutrements of war, near which lie the crowns and sceptres of vanquished foes. Towards this figure she looks, averting her gaze from a triumphal car laden with military trophies which passes by on the left side of the throne, the horses being guided by a genius who aims his dart at the Queen. Before the throne lie various scientific and musical instruments, including the celestial and terrestrial spheres, violins, flutes, mandolines, a palette, a bust, a clock, compasses, and books; and on the right stand three sceptred figures, of whom one imposes her authority on a lion by her side; intended perhaps to show the effects of peace on the savage and unbridled passions of mankind. On the dexter side, two figures, male and female, are reclining: the former, a river god, crowned with sedges, and resting upon a fountain; the latter,

guarding various fruits of the earth in her lap, and holding a sceptre in her right hand. In the left background a beautiful palace is shown, from which there is a long descent by richly decorated stairs and fountains; and on the other side extensive gardens laid out in the style of Le Notre, with parterres, fountains, avenues, and triumphal arches. The colours are harmonious and subdued, and the high lights here, as throughout the series, are woven in white silk.

2. The Triumph of Justice. This sheet is suspended upon the same wall, and measures 16 ft. 3 ins. by 11 ft. 10 ins. The principal figure, impersonating Justice, stands upon a festooned pedestal, and bears in her right hand an erect sword, and in her left a pair of scales evenly balanced. The projecting and circular base of the pedestal affords a seat for four female figures, representing the cardinal virtues: Truth, with her mirror, trampling upon a number of masks; Fortitude, bearing a column in her hands; Temperance, holding out a bridle towards the figure above; the fourth figure is crowned with bay or laurel. On the left, Wisdom, a female figure, seated upon a throne, holds the lamp of knowledge in her left hand, whilst behind her an attendant bears a sceptre surmounted by an eye refulgent with light. In front of the throne lie clasped books and open manuscripts. The background again gives a vast lay-out of fountained and terraced gardens, and in the distance a lake or canal is faintly seen. On the base sinister margin of this hanging (as is also the case with those in the Ball Room) the maker's name and the mark of the Brussels manufactory are shown.

3. The Triumph of Commerce. This sheet hangs over the mantel-piece.* It is the brightest and lightest of the series, but has, unfortunately, been cut at the lower margin in order to adapt it to its position. In the centre a female figure, her robe floating lightly on the breeze, advances from a large vessel moored near the shore; an arrow is in her right hand, and by her side a crocodile. In the foreground are several reclining

* A fine example of Italian sculpture in white marble.

figures occupied in admiring the treasures from distant lands—gems, pearls, coral, tortoiseshell, brightly coloured parrots, tropical shells, and richly chased vessels of gold—profusely displayed before them. The scene is laid amongst pastures and fountains, and in the background is a palace by the sea, with distant views of a town and mountains beyond.

The two remaining sheets are suspended in the Ball Room; one measures 15 ft. 6 ins. by 10 ft. 10 ins., and the other 15 ft. 10½ ins. by 10 ft. 11 ins.

4. The hanging near the door is a graceful and beautiful composition, which may be intended to represent "The Conquest of Earth" and its fruits, or possibly the arrival of the Queen of Sheba on her visit to King Solomon. In the centre a female figure crowned with flowers dismounts from a kneeling camel. With her left hand she swings a smoking censer, whilst in her right a wreath of flowers is supported upon the camel's haunch. Before her are vases of admirably rendered flowers, with melons, pomegranates, and other fruits scattered upon the ground. Behind the camel is seen a female figure seated upon a couch, overshadowed by stately trees. On the right, a prince (perhaps intended for King Solomon) approaches the principal figure with extended sceptre. He is followed by three sceptred princes, who are descending a flight of steps, protected by an awning from the door of a palace beyond. On the left of the design, a lady, followed by a trainbearer, approaches and points to two crowned turbans, lying upon a table, covered with a crimson cloth. In the background, a palace surmounted by a dome is visible between the trees on the right, while fountains, obelisks, and a picturesque cliff overhanging a town occupy the centre and left of the design.

5. The fifth and last of this series is the least intelligible. It seems wholly given to waters and fountains, and may perhaps represent "The Conquest of Water." In the centre is a princess seated, adorned with a feathery crown, and resting her right hand upon a sceptre. An attendant behind her, wearing a similar head-dress, holds out a shell into the jet of water which

spouts from the nostrils of two horses of stone into a cistern beneath. The stream may be seen again issuing below from the mouths of three vessels, guarded by the figure of a river god, who is represented as crowned with reeds, and holding a kind of paddle in his left hand. The final receptacle is a lake or large fountain in the lowest foreground, and from the verge of this rises the pedestal of the structure upon which the central figure reclines against an oblong cistern. Behind, and standing by a couchant lion, is a female figure capped with a head-dress imitating an elephant's head, with tusks and extended trunk. In her left hand she holds out a fish towards the fountain, and with her right sustains a sheaf of wheat beneath her arm. On the dexter side of the hanging stands a majestic turbaned figure, whom another figure, in a sitting posture and holding a narwhal's horn, is addressing. In the background a vast layout of gardens and pastures leads up to terraces and yew arcades: the centre is occupied by an elaborate palace of fountains, with niches and statues, in front of which a large square pool of water is refreshed by the jets which descend from spouting dolphins of stone. This hanging also has the name of Ludocus de Vos, and the Brussels trade mark, concealed behind the frame in the lower sinister corner. Both these fine hangings in the Ball Room were carefully cleaned with breadcrumbs in the South Kensington Museum, in 1888, by Mr. F. W. Andrew, who is employed in the tapestry department there. The other three pieces in the great Drawing Room have never been taken down since they were hung at the completion of the room in 1803.

There are two fine examples of greeneries in a bedroom at this end of the mansion, which were evidently executed in the seventeenth century, and which may be coeval with the older part of the house. No weaver's marks are visible. The texture is not so fine as that of the hangings already described, and they may be of English workmanship.

Two more pieces are now in a store room—one of which has an interesting landscape, and is about twelve feet in length by four feet in height, and is well and neatly woven. The other is

much faded, and seems to have been retouched, many years ago, in a few places with a brown dye, as if to revive the brown tints in the hanging. It is needless to say that the attempt has been an injurious failure.

Sir Geo. R. Sitwell writes :—"I think the two reclining figures in No. 1 represent Earth and Water, and I connect them in my mind with the subject of sheets 4 and 5.

"You admired the fineness of my hangings, but I don't feel sure that you appreciated as much as I do (perhaps possession inclines me to an exaggerated estimate) the beauty of design and colouring. I showed No. 4 in London to Sir W. B. Richmond, R.A., and he was in raptures over it. I feel sure that none of the tapestries now left at the Gobelins are equal to this set; nor do I remember having seen any in my travels which could be said to be superior.

"These emblematic female figures, placed in stately gardens, seem to me to offer the perfection of decoration in tapestry, and I wish our modern makers would take the same motive, instead of offering us life-size figures with no background worth looking at.

"I have written this because I suspect you may be more in sympathy with the earlier tapestries, which are more curious and interesting, but not to be compared for decorative value as for art. In theory, it may be true that tapestries should not resemble pictures, and should not show a distant background; but is there any adverse rule which some great artist has not shown us how to treat with advantage?"