

THE ENGLAND OF QUEEN ELIZABETH.

COMMERCE was crippled by monopolies, and of the arable land of the country not more than one-fourth was in a state of cultivation; but large flocks of sheep were kept on account of their wool. Manufactures were only in their infancy. Woollens had been spun and woven only on a small scale throughout the country; Taunton, in Somersetshire, being at that time the most famous for its fabrics of any town in England; and the West of England was to the world's commerce of that day what the North is now. While Liverpool was still a swamp, and Manchester a straggling hamlet, when Leeds was a cluster of mud huts, and the romantic valley of the Calder a desolate gorge, the streets of Taunton, Exeter, and Dunsten resounded with arts and industry, and the merchant ships of Bridgewater and Bristol were going out or coming in from the remotest corners of the globe. The fairest fields, the richest cities, the proudest strongholds lay in this region. The silk manufacture had been established in London upwards of two hundred years; but as yet upwards of a century and a half must elapse before an adventurous John Lombe erects a silk mill at Derby, and so begins the factory system in England. And that mighty cotton manufacture, upon whose prosperity the feeding of so many millions of people depends, at the birth of Shakespeare, had no existence in the realm. Our principal foreign transactions then lay with the Netherlands, but already the merchant princes of our island were seeking to bind us in the peaceful links of commerce with all lands. Agriculture

was then in the rudest condition; the flower garden was but little cultivated, the parks of the nobility and gentry serving them for pleasure grounds; some valuable excellent herbs and fruits had indeed been recently introduced into the country, amongst which were turnips, carrots, salads, apricots, melons, and currants, but potatoes were not yet cultivated in Britain, and even for a hundred years afterwards were scarcely known as an article of food; and peas were in general brought from Holland, so that old Fuller might well observe that they were "fit dainties for ladies, they came so far and cost so dear." The cultivation of flax was not neglected, that of hops had been introduced, but as yet our principal supply was from the Low Countries. The old dungeon-like castles of the nobility were giving way to the more commodious halls or mansions, but the houses of the people improved slowly. The art of manufacturing the very coarsest sorts of glass had only been introduced into England seven years, common window-glass and bottles being all that was attempted, the finer articles of glassware being still imported from Venice. Few houses had glass in their windows, and even in towns of importance chimneys were an unknown luxury, the smoke being allowed to escape as best it could from the lattice, from the door, or from openings in the roofs. On a humble pallet of straw would the poor husbandman repose his wearied limbs, and wheaten bread was not used by more than one-half of the population. — *From "Shakespeare's True Life."*
By James Walter, Longmans.