CHAPTER XLVIII

THE FULLERS AND THE TANNERS

The work of the ancient fuller was twofold, to make ready for use the cloth fresh from the loom, and to cleanse garments that had been worn. As the garments used by the Romans were mainly of wool, and needed skilful manipulation to retain their size and shape, they were ordinarily sent out of the house to be cleansed; in consequence the trade of the fuller was relatively important. In the part of Pompeii thus far excavated we find two large fulleries and one smaller establishment that can be identified with certainty; and there were doubtless many laundries, with less ample facilities, the purpose of which is not clearly indicated by the remains. The following account of the processes employed relates exclusively to woollen fabrics.

At the time of the destruction of Pompeii, soap, a Gallic invention, was only beginning to come into use; the commonest substitute was fuller's earth, creta fullonia, a kind of alkaline marl. For raising the nap, teasel does not seem to have been used, as with us, but a species of thorn (spina fullonia) the spines of which were mounted in a carding tool resembling a brush (aena); the skin of a hedgehog also was sometimes utilized for this purpose.

The fulling of new cloth involved seven or eight distinct processes,—washing with fuller's earth, or other cleansing agents, to remove the oily matter; beating and stretching, to make the surface even; washing and drying a second time, for cleaning and shrinking; combing with a carding tool to raise the nap, brushing in order to make it ready for clipping, and shearing to reduce the nap to proper length; then, particularly in the case of the white woollens so commonly used, bleaching with sulphur fumes; and finally, smoothing in a large press. The process of cleaning soiled garments was more simple.
A series of paintings in the largest of the fulleries, on the west side of Mercury Street, picture several of these processes with great clearness. They were on a large pillar at the front end of the peristyle, from which they were removed to the Museum at Naples; they supplement admirably the scenes of the Cupids’ fullery in the house of the Vettii, mentioned in a previous chapter (p. 335).

In the first picture (Fig. 225), the clothes are being washed. They are in four round treading vats, which stand in niches formed by a low wall. One of the workmen is still treading his allotment, steadying himself by resting his arms on the walls of the niche at both sides; the other three have finished treading and are standing on the bottom of their tubs, rinsing the garments before wringing them out.

The next scene (Fig. 226) is three-fold. In the foreground at the left sits a richly dressed lady, to whom a girl brings a garment that has been cleaned; that the woman is not one of those employed in the fullery is evident from her elaborate headdress, necklace, and bracelets. In the background a workman dressed in a tunic is carding a large piece of cloth. Near by another workman carries on his shoulders a bleaching frame, over which garments were spread to receive the fumes of the sulphur; he holds in his left hand the pot in which the brimstone was burned. An owl, symbol of Minerva, who was worshipped by fullers as their patron divinity, sits upon the frame; and the man underneath has on his head a wreath of leaves from the olive tree, which was sacred to the same goddess.

In the third picture a young man hands a garment to a girl; at the right a woman is cleaning a carding tool. The fourth (Fig. 227) gives an excellent representation of a fuller’s press, worked by two upright screws; it is so much like our modern presses as to need no explanation. The festoons with which it is adorned are of olive leaves.

With these pictures before us, it will be easy to understand the plan of the fullery on the west side of Stabian Street, opposite the house of Caecilius Jucundus (Fig. 228). It was excavated in 1873. The building was not originally designed for a fuller’s establishment, but for a private house, and part of the rooms were retained for domestic use, as the well preserved kitchen (d), and some of the other rooms opening off from the atrium (β). The furniture of the atrium — a table in front of the impluvium, with a pedestal for a fountain figure, and a marble basin to receive the jet — is like that of the house the interior of which is shown in Plate VII.

The fuller’s appliances are found in the shop next to the entrance (21), and in the peristyle (q). In the former are the
foundations of three treading vats, and on the opposite side an oblong depression in which the press was placed. The peristyle contains three large basins of masonry for soaking and rinsing the clothes. A jet of water fell into the one next the rear wall (3), from which it ran into the other two through holes in the sides. Along the wall is a raised walk (4) on a level with the top of the basins, into which the workmen descended by means of steps. At the ends of this walk are places for seven treading vats, five in one group, two in the other. The wall above is decorated with a long sketchy painting, in which the fullers are seen engaged in the celebration of a festival,—doubtless the Quinquatrus, the feast of Minerva; the celebration is followed by a scene before a magistrate, resulting from a fight engaged in by the celebrants. A mass of fuller's earth was found in the passage at m.

From the receipts found in the house of Caecilius Jucundus, it appears that this thrifty Pompeian, in the years 56–60 A.D., rented a fullery belonging to the city. In view of the nearness of this establishment to his house, it seems likely that he was in charge of the business here. At the time of the eruption, however, the enterprise was in the hands of Marcus Vesonius Primus, who lived in the house next door (No. 20), where a portrait horn, dedicated to him by his cashier (arcarius), stands in the atrium; the house is often called the house of Orpheus, from the large painting on the rear wall of the garden.

To judge from the election notices painted on the front of the fullery and on the houses at either side, Primus must have taken an active interest in local politics. He was an ardent partisan, as witness this inscription: *Cn. Helvius aed. d. r. p. (for aedilem, dignum re publica) Vesonius Primus rogat,—Vesonius Primus urges the election of Gnaeus Helvius as aedile, a man worthy of public office.* The endorsement of Gaius Rufus is even stronger: *C. Gavius Rufus II vir. o. v. f. utilum r. p. (duumvirum, oro vos, facite, utilem rei publice) Vesonius Primus rogat,—Vesonius Primus requests the election of Gaius Gavius Rufus as duumvir, a man serviceable to public interests; do elect him, I beg of you.*

In one of the shorter recommendations, Primus names his occupation: *L. Ceium Secundum II v. i. d. Primus fullo rogat.*—'Primus the fuller asks the election of Lucius Ceius Secundus as duumvir with judicatory authority.' On one occasion he united with his employees in favoring a candidate for the aedilship: *Cn. Helvium Sabinius aed. Primus cum suis fac [it],—'Primus and his household are working for the election of Gnaeus Helvius Sabinus as aedile.'

The fullery on Mercury Street, like that just described, had been made over from a private house, built in the pre-Roman period. Among other changes, the columns of the large peristyle were replaced by massive pillars of masonry supporting a gallery above for the drying of clothes. At the rear are four square basins, the two larger of which are more than seven feet across; the water passed from one to the other as in the basins of Primus's fullery. In the corner near the last basin are six rectangular niches for treading vats, separated by a low wall, the purpose of which is clear from Fig. 225. There is a vaulted room at the right of the peristyle, with a cistern curb, a large basin of masonry, and a stone table. Here a substance was found which the excavators supposed to be soap, but which was doubtless fuller's earth, like that found in the establishment on Stabian Street.

There were naturally fewer tanners than fullers; and so far only one tannery has been discovered. That is a large establishment, however, filling almost an entire block near the Stabian Gate (Ins. I. 1), excavated in 1873. Like the two larger fulleries, it occupied a building designed for a house. The appliances of the craft are found in only a small part of the structure; they relate to two processes,—the preparation of the fluids used for tanning, and the manipulation of the hides.
The mixture for the tan vats was prepared in a tank under a colonnade opening on the garden. It could be drawn off through two holes in the side into a smaller basin below, or conducted by means of a gutter running along the wall to three large earthen vessels.

The vats, fifteen in number, are in a room formerly used as an atrium (Fig. 229). They are about 5 feet in diameter, and from 4 to about 5½ feet deep; they were built of masonry, and plastered; two holes were made in the side of each to serve as a convenience in climbing in and out. Between adjacent pairs of pits was an oblong basin about twenty inches deep, lined with wood. On either side of this was a large earthen jar, sunk in the earth; a small, round hole between the basin and each jar seems to mark the place of a pipe tile, connected with the former at the bottom. The large pits were for ordinary tanning; the oblong basins were probably used in making fine leather (aluta), a process in which alum was the principal agent, the chemicals being placed in the jars on either side, and supplied to the basins through the pipe tiles.

In the same building four tools were found, similar to those used by tanners at the present time. One was a knife, of bronze, with a charred wooden handle on the back of the blade; two were scraping irons, with a handle on each end; and there was another iron tool with a crescent-shaped blade.

The garden on which the colonnade opened contains an open-air triclinium. The table was ornamented with a mosaic top, now in the Naples Museum, with a characteristic design (Fig. 230). The principal motive is a skull; below is a butterfly on the rim of a wheel, symbols of the fluttering of the disembodied soul and of the flight of time. On the right and on the left are the spoils that short-lived man leaves behind him,—here a wanderer’s staff, a wallet, and a beggar’s tattered robe; there, a sceptre, with a mantle of royal purple. Over all is a level, with the plumb line hanging straight, symbolic of Fate, that sooner or later equalizes the lots of all mankind. The thought of the tanner, or of the earlier proprietor of the house, is easy to divine: Mors aurem vellens, Vivite, att, venia,

‘Death plucks my ear, and says,
“Live!” for I come.’