

L A C E.

(THE LAST PAPER WRITTEN BY THE LATE MRS. BURY PALLISER.)



F all beautiful objects for personal decoration, there is scarcely one which appeals more to the imagination than lace. Made, as it were, out of nothing, of no worth in the material, its value consists entirely in the beauty of its workmanship. Who invented lace no one can tell. Women had embroidered from the earliest times, and embroidery, *point coupé*, and lacis

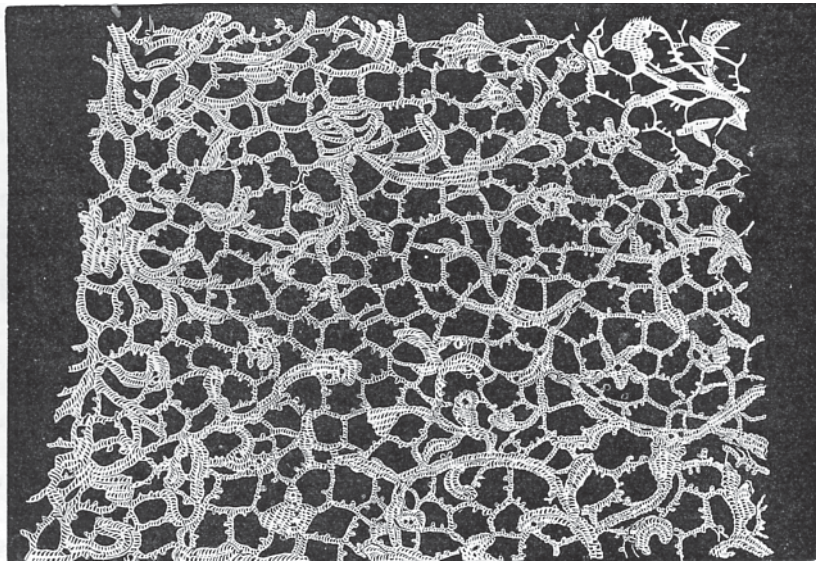
were no doubt suggestive of lace; but to what dreamy enthusiast or ecstatic recluse it at first occurred to turn the monotonous embroidery into an independent creation, and work the filmy threads together with nothing but the air for a background; to emancipate the first piece of cut-work from its linen cerements, must ever remain a mystery.

During the early ages, lace was entirely made in the convents, exclusively for the Church and its ministers, and little of it therefore was known by the laity; indeed, severe were the restrictions

imposed by the bishops on the nuns who worked for other than ecclesiastical purposes.

At the period of the Renaissance, when art was gradually emancipating itself from the Church, the making of lace still remained in the convent, but the nuns teaching the art to their lay pupils, the knowledge soon spread to the outside world, and lace-making formed the principal occupation of the ladies of the day. In feudal times it was the custom for knightly families to send their daughters to the castles of their suzerain lords, there to be

circulation was that of the Venetian Vinciolo, to whom some say Catherine de Medicis, whom he accompanied to the French Court, granted in 1535, the special privilege of making and selling the ruffs she had herself introduced. At this period, when art and industry were so identified that great artists did not disdain to direct the public taste, and to furnish ideas to even the humblest industries, the lace-maker's art was not excluded from the general movement, and the pencils of renowned masters among the Italian artists were called into



VENETIAN POINT.

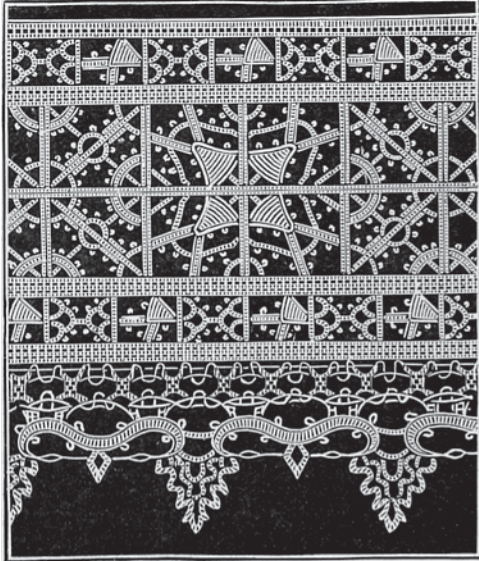
trained in all female accomplishments. Here the lady *châtelaine* presided over the work, and taught the "maidens" who surrounded her the gentle and noble art of the needle, their labours beguiled by the "chansons à toile," as the ballads composed for the occasion were termed. Thus Scotland's Mary, under the guidance of Queen Catherine de Medicis (herself an unrivalled needlewoman), learnt her proficiency in cut-work, which formed her solace during her after years of captivity.

Lace-making was then no vulgar trade, and no doubt the many collections of designs for lace and embroidery published in the seventeenth century were executed for those noble workwomen. The volume most generally in

requisition for the production of beautiful designs for laces and cut-work. The richness of the complicated patterns, the dedication of the books to queens and other high-born ladies, prove they were for the use of such as these rather than for manufacture, and confirm the conclusion that lace was not then a commercial speculation, but an agreeable occupation in which ladies employed their hours of leisure, and at the same time provided themselves with a new ornament for their dress.

About seventy of these pattern-books have come down to us, one-third of which were published at Venice, the great lace school of the period. These books have now become scarce, for being designed for patterns traced with a

metal stylus, or pricked through, many perished in the using, and they are now much sought



RETICELLA, OR GREEK LACE. (FROM ZANTE.)

after by collectors as specimens of early wood block printing.

To give a sketch of the history of lace, it must be traced through its several gradations from open-work embroidery, which, though comprising a wide variety of decoration, went, in the seventeenth century, under the general name of cut-work.

The fashion of adorning linen prevailed from the earliest times. Either the edges were worked in close embroidery, the threads drawn and fashioned with a needle into various forms, or the ends of the cloth unravelled and plaited with geometric precision. To judge from the description of the linen grave-clothes of St. Cuthbert, the noted Bishop of Lindisfarne (who died in 685, and whose body was transferred to Durham, to save its spoliation by the Danes—Reginald, a monk of Durham, was an eye-witness to his disinterment in the twelfth century), they were ornamented in a similar manner to that we have described. "There had been," said the chronicler, "put over him a sheet . . . This skirt had a fringe of linen thread of a finger's length; upon its sides and ends were woven a border of projecting workmanship, fabricated of the thread itself,

bearing the figures of birds and beasts, so arranged that between every two pair there were interwoven among them the representation of a branching tree, which divides the figures. This tree, so tastefully depicted, appears to be putting forth its leaves." There can be no doubt that this sheet, for many years preserved in the cathedral church of Durham, was a specimen of drawn, or cut work, which, though at a later date it came into general use, was at that period used for ecclesiastical purposes alone, and was an art looked upon as a Church secret.

Cut-work was made in various ways. In one process, a network of threads was attached or gummed to a piece of linen cloth, and the pattern formed by sewing round the pieces of cloth that were to remain with button-hole stitch, and cutting away the rest—hence the name of cut-work. At other times, no cloth was used at all, the foundation threads were arranged in a frame or on a parchment pattern, radiating from one centre, and the pattern wrought by the needle into geometric forms. In the cathedral at Prague is preserved a



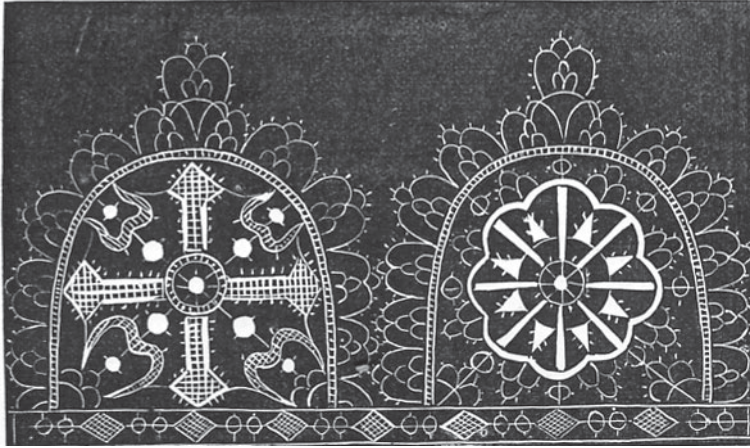
PASSEMENT AU FUSEAU. (VINCIOLO, EDITION 1623.)

priest's robe, executed by Queen Anne of Bretagne; a curious piece of embroidery.

Cut-work still lingers on in the north of Europe. The Swedish housewives pierce and

stitch the holiday collars of their husbands and sons; and some twenty years ago the white smock-frock of the English labourer might be

linen were drawn, retaining the design and forming the threads into a square network, rendered firm by a stitch at each intersection; the design was then embroidered, often in colours. The lace also of Central and South America consists chiefly of darned netting and drawn-work, and the tissues of Persia and China are similarly decorated. In Russia the use of embroidered linen is widely spread. The figured towels decorated with drawn-work and darned netting are associated with all the events of the peasant's life. On days of *fêtes* they are hung round his dwelling, decorate his carved chest and the images of his saints. The



POINT COUPÉ. (VINCIOLO.)

seen ornamented with an insertion of cut-work running from the collar and the shoulder.

Not many years back, when present at a peasant wedding at the church of St. Lo (Dept. La Manche), the *toile d'honneur*, which, according to custom, was extended over the heads of the married pair while the priest pronounces the blessing, was of the finest cut-work; and a splendid cut-work pall still covers the coffin of the fisher-tribe when borne in procession through the streets of Dieppe, a votive offering worked by the hands of some lady saved from shipwreck, and presented as a memorial of her gratitude.

Lacis consists of a network of square ground "rezeuil," upon which the pattern was either darned or worked in with counted stitches. It was also called "spider-work," or *opus araneum*.

A most important piece of lacis, belonging to Mrs. Hailstone, was exhibited at the Art International Exhibition of 1874, an altar-frontal, fourteen feet by four feet, executed in *point coupé*, representing eight scenes of the Passion of our Saviour, in all fifty-six figures, surrounded by Latin inscriptions. It is assumed to be of English workmanship of an early period.

Coeval with lacis and *point coupé* was drawn-work, in which the woof and weft thread of the

peasant girl passes her time in accumulating a store in anticipation of her marriage, when they are distributed among the guests, twisted round the harness of the horses, and ornament the wedding sledges.

Cut-work was produced by cutting the pattern out of the solid linen. In Reticella (see illustration on page 181) the design was formed by arranging a network of threads upon a small frame, and crossing and intersecting them into various complicated geometric patterns, the crossings secured, and then all the foundation threads either covered with an evenly-twisted thread, or worked over with the button-hole stitch. When in the end of the sixteenth century a desire was felt to make this embroidery movable, then detached lace was introduced with designs of endless variety, segments of circles, and infinite geometric combinations. This was the favourite work of the Medicis ladies in France and Italy, of the court of Philip of Spain, and of Queen Elizabeth. The ruffs of the period were made of the finest reticella combined with cut-work. Of these finer laces little remain. Starch and old age were their destruction, and only the coarser descriptions, used for altar-cloths and shrouds, still exist in the Ionian Islands under the name of Greek lace.

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