

## THE LACE INDUSTRY IN BELGIUM

A PAPER READ TO THE MEMBERS OF THE "NEEDLE AND BOBBIN CLUB"  
BY MME. VAN SCHELLE, ON THE AFTERNOON OF JANUARY 22, 1917\*

THE present economic crisis is turning the thoughts not only of the world at large to this most comprehensive problem, "How to Provide for a Nation," but the thought of workers, industrial and commercial, is aroused how to face this world problem.

In the old pioneer days of America, when distances were great and the difficulties of ready exchange of commodities were insurmountable, men and women were obliged not only to be simple in their mode of life, thrusting aside all thought of superfluous luxury, but they were forced to be self-productive and self-sustaining in their daily life.

How far the world has drifted from such simplicity we have but to look around us to-day to discover, and thus the great world conflict that has been raging for a period of over thirty months brings this same problem home in varying degrees to all nations, neutral as well as belligerent. Nothing short of a world crisis such as we are experiencing could have shaken us from our lethargy.

Granted that some of the economic disturbance is due to sympathetic values, some to speculative values, some to the real problem of demand and supply, still the fact remains that we are shaken from our old comfortable dream of expansive internationalism.

\* Mme. Van Schelle's sudden death was announced in the first edition of the BULLETIN; her ambition was to better the unfortunate conditions of the lace-maker in Belgium, and with that end in view she had planned to establish a model school for lace-making and other home industries at Papenvoort, her residence in Belgium. We sincerely hope that Mme. Van Schelle's excellent work may be carried out when the present world upheaval permits.

What are we going to do about it?

What are we going to be forced to do about it?

It is perhaps too soon to say, yet certain factors have already proclaimed themselves: first, that a new economic balance between producer and consumer is bound to assert itself. Certain elements are inalienably concerned in this fact. Full man-power would be appreciably diminished in countries that have hitherto been industrial feeders of world markets.



A CLASS IN LACE-MAKING AT PAPENVOORT

Secondly, these same nations will have surplus (at first) of partially incapacitated man-power.

Thirdly, women in these same countries, having done men's work during the period of warfare, must be reckoned with.

Again, the wide material destruction in the warring countries themselves will entail the employment of a certain amount of labor before these same countries can become world producers. All these factors have already temporarily raised the wage of the laborer.

Will it fall? If so, will it fall to the old level?

These are very large and perplexing questions that will have much

influence on the investment of capital abroad during and following the reconstruction period.

It may seem a digression to you, as members of the "Needle and Bobbin Club," that I should preface my remarks on lace-making by these statements. However, if you will follow this line of reasoning into the realm of the lace-makers of one little country, Belgium, I think you will agree that they have bearing upon the subject under our discussion.

Let me quote from "Kingdom of Belgium—Dept. of Industry and Labor":\*

"The manufacture of lace is an industry of fancy goods; it is a marvellous art, essentially national for Belgium, where it has been spread for about 500 years.

"The lace industry is practised in all the provinces of Belgium with the exception of the province of Liège, but the two provinces of Flanders are the principal seat of this industry. In a total of 47,500 lace-makers, West Flanders numbers 25,500 and East Flanders 18,200. The art of lace-making is still much professed amongst the Flemish population, who at all times have shown an almost proverbial skill for all kinds of needle work. In certain districts it may be said that all women, young or old, handle the bobbin or the needle, and where the manufacture of lace has fallen back before the invasion of great industry, it still possesses a kind of popularity; its remembrance remains alive, and little would be needed to regenerate it."

The quaint wording, which is often obscure, in this extract is still very suggestive as bearing upon the social and economic phase of lace-making in Belgium. The figures there given for the number of lace-makers in the two Flanders is 43,700, leaving only 3,800 for the rest of the entire country.

Mr. Rowntree † says: "By far the most important home industry in Belgium is lace-making, which, in 1896, occupied 50,000 persons, almost all women. Twenty years earlier, however, the number was three times as great, and recent evidence shows that since the census was taken it has continued to decline."

\* Louisiana Purchase Exposition, St. Louis, 1904; collected and published under the direction of the General Commissariat of Belgium. Page 384.

† "Land and Labor, Lessons from Belgium," 1910, page 89.

Despite the war it has been stated that 52,000 persons are engaged in making lace in Belgium. In Turnhout, province of Antwerp, the government delegate to the lace schools told me that there are there between five and six thousand persons engaged in making lace, 1,200 of these being children in the schools and convents.

No records had been published between 1896 and 1910, when Mr. Rowntree's work was written, but he asserts that the official sources of information are very complete. However, a discrepancy exists between these figures. Personally, I am inclined to believe that the number of lace-makers has not only held its own but has increased of late years.

To continue the quotation from the General Notes published by the Commissariat of Belgium, St. Louis, 1904: "Three essential agents co-operate to the manufacture of lace:

"1. The commercial contractor or manufacturer, who centralizes the production of certain articles for which he has received orders, or the sale of which he foresees and which are almost entirely manufactured outside of his premises. He distributes his orders among his middlemen and he very rarely supplies raw material.

"2. The middleman who is placed between the lace-maker and the commercial contractor is sometimes an agent, sometimes a convent directed by nuns.

"3. *The lace-maker working at home.*

"The Belgian lace intended for exportation is sent to wholesale houses, which in turn sell it to linen drapers, milliners, dressmakers, and sometimes directly to customers.

"The competition of Belgian lace with foreign lace need not be much feared, for nothing is produced abroad which is similar to the Belgian article; but the numerous mechanical imitations, especially the Points of Venice, of Chantilly and of Valenciennes do a great deal of harm to the Belgian industry.

"It is tradition which secures the recruiting of the staff of lace-makers. The mother initiates her daughter to the lace manufacture which she has practised from her childhood; but, as a general rule, she no longer teaches her the trade, but sends her to the neighboring lace-making school, where the child is taught to make the lace she prefers. There

are in Belgium 160 schools for lace-making and embroidering on tulle, whereof three-quarters are managed by nuns.

“The labor contract between the lace-maker and the middleman is always verbal and sometimes tacit. The remuneration alone is settled and, moreover, is always established by the middleman, for the manufacturer seldom interferes. The lace-maker is almost always paid by the piece, in a few rare cases she is paid by the day’s work.

“At the present moment the lace manufacture is in a period of crisis, and the future of this industry does not appear very bright; events of an economical character, the decrease of real luxury, the fashion, the competition of imitation fabrics, and especially the deplorable commercial organization of the lace industry have contributed to bring forth this situation.

“Nevertheless, on the other hand, the traditional skill of the Flemish and Brabantine lace-maker, the simplicity of their habits, the reputation and considerable demand for Belgian lace, lead us to hope that our fine artistic industry will succeed in maintaining its ground.”

Let us analyze these conditions to see what are the factors bearing on the present conditions of lace-making in Belgium. The writer asserts that this is an art industry with 500 years of ancestry; that Belgian lace need not fear competition with foreign lace, as nothing is produced abroad similar to it. However, lace buyers tell me that they find Belgian-made lace in foreign markets, for instance, in Italy, selling as domestic lace. We must draw the conclusion then that Belgium not only produces an intrinsically characteristic lace product of her own, but competes with foreign countries in producing their national laces and selling them in *their* open markets. Thus she has a commodity to offer the world, one for which there is a ready market, for which the customer is obliged to pay liberally.

But what about the producer?

Again the writer asserts that there are 160 lace schools, three-quarters of which are managed by nuns. That the middleman, which is sometimes a convent, has almost unlimited power, for this agent fixes the wage rate; moreover, that the lace-maker is paid by the piece. But he does not say that this piece-work is established upon the inherent relation of time and skill necessary to produce such handicraft. Then he

adds that the lace manufacture (production) is in a period of crisis, that the future does not appear very bright; the factors leading to this condition he enumerates as economic in character, the decrease in *real* luxury, the fashion, the competition of imitation fabrics, but calls attention especially to the fact of the deplorable commercial organization of the lace industry.

He finishes, however, with a hope of the resuscitation of this art industry based on four factors: First, traditional skill; second, simplicity of peasant habits; third, the reputation of and, fourth, demand for Belgian lace.

Three of these factors are legitimate hopes; one, however, the simplicity of the habits of the Belgian lace-maker, is open to question, for no less an authority on Belgium than Mr. B. S. Rowntree in his study "Land and Labor, Lessons from Belgium," asserts that the low standard of living in Belgium, the deficiency of twenty-six per cent. in the supply of protein, and of fourteen per cent. in that of fuel energy, leave the Belgian laborer not exactly hungry, but like a horse on grass, looking well but not up to the maximum of his energy output. Thus under-feeding and individual barter are two of the factors that have kept Belgium a competitor in world products through *low wages*. A third element is time-sweating. This we find acute in the lace industry.

"No one who considers the average earnings of these people in relation to the number of hours they work, can fail to realize why the younger generation prefers factory life. To be sure, as home-workers are always paid 'one piece,' their wages vary greatly, but even the maximum, which only a few can secure, is below the level of the factory.

"Mr. Pierre Verhaegen (in 'Les Industries à Domicile') gives particulars of 151 lace-makers, working on an average of eleven and one-half hours per day, whose earnings average less than a penny (9.4 cents) per hour, or tenpence (1.08 franc) per day. Of another 43 lace-makers, mostly women with household duties to perform, and only devoting five and one-half hours a day to their lace, the net earnings average four-fifths of a penny (8.2 centimes) per hour, or 4½d. (46 centimes) per day. The ordinary income of a woman lace-maker in the prime of life may be put down at between 10d. and 1s. 3d. for a day of from ten to twelve hours work." \*

\* Rowntree, *idem.*, p. 90.

The following quotations are taken from extracts from the notebook of Mr. Rowntree when visiting communes in East Flanders in 1906:

“Farms with seven and one-half acres, ten beasts. His two daughters make lace. Work from 5:30 a.m. to 10 or 11 at night, stopping only a short time for meals. Earn up to 1s. 7d. per day!

“Lace-makers. Small house. Earth floor. Walls rendered in mortar but not plastered. Two rooms and a scullery on ground floor. Rent, £2: 8s. a year. Father works in France during summer. Daughter making lace earns a shilling a day for twelve hours' work. Works from 7 a.m. to 10 p.m., with three hours off.”

Mr. Rowntree continues: “The writer well remembers these cases. In the first, the girls were quick and clean, and made very fine lace. The home was a comfortable one, and they looked happy and healthy, notwithstanding their terribly long hours. They need not have worked so long, but wanted the extra money for dress. The other case was very different—a bare and cheerless home, the father a ‘Francsman,’ away all summer working in France. Here it was hard necessity which drove the daughter to sit twelve hours a day at her lace cushion making lovely lace for a penny an hour! Her case is not exceptional by any means—probably, as stated above, the majority of lace workers are earning very similar wages.”

If such were the conditions before the war, what will they be when hostilities are over? When the sale of labor will involve the three elements of which we spoke at the outset, namely, lack of full man-power, temporary surplus of incapacitated man-power, and the balance that woman's labor will throw into the economic situation, liberated as she is economically by having done man's work for man's pay during the war.

Many possibilities open up before us when the days of legitimate manslaughter shall have ceased and when the reconstruction of peaceful arts and occupations will engage the human activity that is now occupied in self-destruction. It is important that these activities be constructed aright without the handicap of the past.

But this reconstruction of the lace industry involves not only woman's labor but child labor.

Perhaps I can give you a more graphic picture of what this child

industry has been in the past by again quoting Mr. Rowntree's words: "When investigating technical instruction in East Flanders, a school was visited which so strikingly illustrates the dangers arising in a country without any system of compulsory education that a reference to it is worth while. The school was held in a small house situated in a narrow lane, apparently without court or garden. The owner and manageress was a dirty old woman who, in a small back kitchen, was chattering—this during school hours—with three or four of her neighbors. She was surrounded by eight or ten children of the poorest class, and the room, the children, and women had a neglected appearance. The old woman, unable to understand French, called in the teacher, a neatly dressed girl of sixteen or seventeen, who explained that the merchants to whom they sold their laces had strictly forbidden them to show either school or handicraft. About twenty-five little girls were present, all of them under thirteen, and averaging from eight to ten years of age. They attended no other school and—to judge from the information given—were only instructed in bobbin-lace work, for which they received a small payment from the woman who sold it. Similar 'schools' are to be found in West Flanders, and the Government, even if it knew of their existence, would be unable, under existing enactments, to close or improve them."

The following statements are so vitally relevant as bearing on this subject that I must crave your indulgence by again quoting Mr. Rowntree: \* "Education in Belgium suffers severely from being made a party question. It is doubtful whether in any country it has aroused more bitter feeling between religious and political bodies, and it has been proportionately handicapped. Although a good beginning is made by an extensive system of kindergartens, the education of the older children cannot be looked upon as satisfactory. As it is not compulsory, a large proportion of them, probably ten per cent. or more, never go to school at all, and of those who do, many attend very irregularly, while the great majority leave school when they are twelve years old, if not before. It is the irregularity of attendance, rather than the character of the teaching, which accounts for the high proportion of illiterate persons in Belgium, probably not less than twenty per cent. of the total

\* *Idem.*, p. 281.



population over eight years of age. Of course the proportion is highest among the old people, but it is very serious even among the young.

“Upon the whole, therefore, it must be said that the standard of primary education in Belgium is a low one, a fact which cannot fail to diminish the wage-earning capacity of the workers.”

In 1914, before the outbreak of hostilities, this controversial question which had in 1879-84 been the cause of the downfall of the Liberal Government, had been solved by putting Government, Adopted, and Adoptable schools on the same footing; in consequence a compulsory education law was passed, but not yet enforced at the opening of the war.

Among other points of interest and importance it provides that, within an interim of five years, there shall be organized in all the communes of the kingdom, schools whose programs are to be progressively completed by teaching subjects with a practical tendency, preparatory to forming technical and professional training.

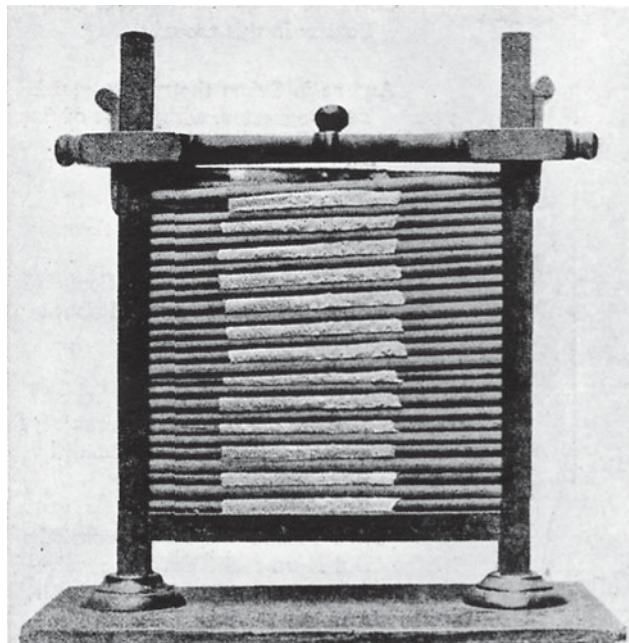
It is of vital importance that in the rehabilitation of Belgium, education should have the attention of the foremost educators, sociologists, and philanthropists. Moreover, it should be a comparatively easy problem when the world is ready to give her a helping hand and we begin life anew, as it were, with a clean slate, to take the best from every country and to adapt it to our local needs.

The economic relation to the educational status is so close that it will behoove us to take this larger view seriously to heart if we hope to benefit or reform in any way the lace-making industry.

Unfortunately, the ethical side of an economic problem is not what determines its fate. It is the practical one of supply and demand and the conditions under which these are met that decide its future. Public opinion acts as a leaven slowly raising the status of well being. This question of supply and demand of human labor will have a vital influence on the lace industry of Belgium.

Personally, I am rather of the opinion that the economic elimination of lace producers might have a beneficent effect upon this industry; the output being sensibly diminished, the wage would increase. Then, too, the same problem must repeat itself in other warring countries where lace-making is a national industry. Switzerland would perhaps remain

a serious competitor in *sweating*. We can't determine with exactitude any of these factors; we can only outline the general trend that must result from this world upheaval.



OLD-FASHIONED GAUFFERING MACHINE FOR CRIMPING LACE  
USED ON PEASANTS' CAPS