

THE MAKING OF VENICE LACES.

BY ADA STERLING.

(Illustrated by Louise Willis Snead.)

NOTWITHSTANDING the commercial importance of lace manufacture, the fabric, soft, intricate, and always fascinating to lovers of the beautiful, has proved a stimulus to the imagination even of the more material minded. A cobweb glistening in the early morning with tracings of dew is no more mysteriously complex than many of the old Flemish laces still treasured. The beauty of the early Italian laces was considered so remarkable by those who saw their rise, that fantastic theories were advanced as to their origin, their wondrous meshes seeming too beautiful to have originated through ordinary human agency.

Mrs. Bury Palliser, whose entertaining book on laces was published more than forty years ago, tells a pretty story of the first Venice laces, that may well be recalled. According to her legend, there was a young mariner whose sweetheart, mourning in his absence, beguiled the tedious hours of her loneliness by working the simple *puntos* or point laces that engaged the attention of the deft needlewomen of her vicinage. Once her lover brought her a branch of white coral which he had found in some far-away sea, and this the little maid cherished during his absence until its beauty so impressed itself upon her that she sought to repeat it in her needlework. In attempting this, her work of love at last resulted in the creation of the marvelous Venetian lace which has defied the most subtle attempts of inventors to produce a machine that should imitate it. A story only less romantic is told in which the original patterns of the priceless stuff are said to have been taken from a branch of seaweed, of the variety known as "mermaid." Whatever their beginning, the Venetian needle products reached a place of unusual value, and today, as in the fifteenth century, "Venice points" are the examples from which the best laces, whatever their school, are derived.

In a former paper illustrations were given of costly specimens of Venetian lace that have found their way to the new world. All show the principal feature of their manufacture to be the button-hole stitch done with exquisite precision in infinitesimal threads of

finest flax. The stamp of perfected elegance which all Venice lace bears is the result of its having been evolved in a period and environment of luxury and constantly widening art development. Primitive needlewomen display no art ingenuity in getting beyond the simpler twisted effects in thread work. The product of native Indians, of Syrians, of South Americans, and even of the Mexicans, is all flat. Twisted threads forming meshes similar to those seen in veilings and with a "star" ground, are the sole resource of these workers, to whom even the open button-hole stitch as an embellishment is unknown. Though often most complex in design, the early laces of Italy and Spain were equally flat until the workers began to imitate with the needle the raised and knotted effects of the hard *reticella* or bone laces of Greece. Once the method of applying the button-hole stitch became known among them, however, the experimenters among the more enlightened workers of those countries, and later of France and England, were untiring in testing the possibilities. Soon this stitch became the basis of all Venetian laces. It was used for the making of every portion of the pattern, including the plain and ornamental *brides* that connected the closely-placed but irregular *motifs*; for the cordonnets or raised borders and edges, and even for the filling-in stitches.

To make the Venetian needle-point lace, little is required in the way of materials or tools, the chief expense being for the purchase of the finest flax thread. Nothing beyond an experiment in stitches should be attempted with cotton thread, but even this were better not made. In fact, the amateur in lace-making wastes her time in trying to develop any satisfactory lace product with cotton, however fine. Not only does cotton thread lack pliancy in working, but it stiffens and becomes thick and harsh when cleaned. The lace-makers of Europe confine themselves to Brabant and Mechlin threads of flax spun with the utmost care and of an incomparable color and texture. Mechlinburg threads are preferred generally, numbers twelve and seven being employed for the tracing of the pattern. They are carried around the

clearly-drawn design, and serve as a foundation on which to hang the other stitches. Number twenty of the same thread is used for the filling-in and finishing stitches. Lace needles are very similar to those used in ordinary sewing, but are slightly duller at the points, and somewhat shorter.



FIG. 1. THE TRACING THREAD.

The first step in the making of modern Venetian or Burano point lace is to secure the traced pattern. Here the home markets as yet are deficient. To the present, American needleworkers scarcely have ventured beyond the production of Battenburg and coarse scroll work known commercially as Renaissance lace, but which have merely a temporary value or rank. These laces are worked from patterns printed on paper muslin, easy to handle at first, but in no way so satisfactory as the tracings on linen, oil-silk or parchment that are seen in the hands of practised workers of Europe, and that often are the product of the fancy of skilful artists. The American needlewoman, therefore, who essays to accomplish even a small piece of Italian lace would better seek to have an original design free from the wide lines that invite the introduction of machine-made braids. These have no place in fine hand-made lace.

Foreign workers employ two traced patterns of the article they wish to make; one, the pattern entire, and another divided into small sections, each of which contains one of the figures or *motifs* that go to make up the full design. The sections are worked one by one, until, all having been completed, they are grouped upon the large tracing of the design and joined by means of *brides*, bars, or ground *réseau*. The pattern is elaborated by adding the tiny loops known as *picots*.

Let us suppose the pattern, preferably of parchment, and bearing a simple design, is at hand and ready for working. Keeping well in mind the picture of the finished work, begin with a detached *motif*, and carefully prick the outlines through the parchment at even distances and in groups of two holes. Thread the needle with number twelve lace

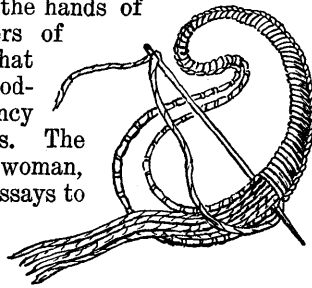


FIG. 2. THE PADDING.

thread, and, beginning at the under side, draw same through one of the holes in any group of two. Do not knot the end but hold it lightly in the fingers, so that it may not slip through. Push the needle down again through the second hole of the group so as to leave a lightly laid stitch upon the upper side. Continue this operation quite around the *motif* until the outline is defined, then draw the two ends of the thread together on the under side of the parchment and secure by tying. The real *fil de trace* or tracing thread may now be put in position. With thread number seven proceed again around the *motif*, drawing the new thread through the stitches formed by the first, until a cord-like foundation edge is provided for the filling stitches. Where the pattern is somewhat open this edge may be lightly padded and completed at once, by working over it close button-hole stitches, which later may be embellished with *picots* when the work otherwise has been completed. The appearance of the lace at this stage is shown in illustrations numbers one and two. Illustration number three shows the pattern developed by numerous filling-in stitches and *picots*. The *motif* is taken from an old specimen of lace once owned by Queen Elizabeth.

It has been said that cotton should not enter into the making of lace, but a modification of this statement may be made where the *cordonnets* is to be especially heavy, as shown in the central figure of the model here used, or where a heavy ring is desired as, for example, in the center of a group of petals or other forms. Usually a fine linen cord serves as a sufficient pad. The effect of such cord may be seen in the edge of the wing-like forms that are now added to the original gourd-shaped *motif*. The light and heavy *cordonnets* appearing in the finished lace are equivalent to the broad and light pencil strokes of a drawing.

Where the center rings or outer edges of a design are to be greatly raised a padding of soft cotton may be used with satisfactory results.

The filling-in stitches of all Venetian laces, whether in leaf or petal or geometrical figure,

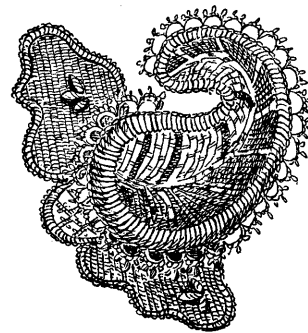


FIG. 3. SINGLE LACE MOTIF WITH FILLING-IN STITCHES AND PICOTS. (ENLARGED FOUR TIMES.)

are worked from left to right, invariably. Begin by passing the needle through the upper tracing thread which, as has been said, acts as a foundation for the ornamental stitches. Stick the needle in at the right side of the *motif* and carry the thread across to the left where it is to be passed through the tracing thread and brought out again. Now work directly back across this strand a row of button-hole stitches, and secure the working thread at right side when this has been reached. Without detaching the strand carry it back again to the left side, and begin a second row of button-hole stitching, working over the thread just laid in position and into the loop of the button-hole stitch above it. Omit no one of these preceding loops. By securing each stitch in this way the filling becomes like a mesh of smooth fine cloth with straight lines marking it, unbroken by ridges such as would be formed were the stitches less exactly lapped. Evenness, too, is absolutely necessary and all loops or stitches must be drawn to a similar tautness and made to lie regularly along the line of sewing. Repeat the process again and again until the portion to be filled is completed. Having finished the filling in, run a coarse linen cord around the edge of each division of the *motif*, and work over it and the tracing thread a close button-hole stitch. This will form a *cordonnet* sufficient to throw the

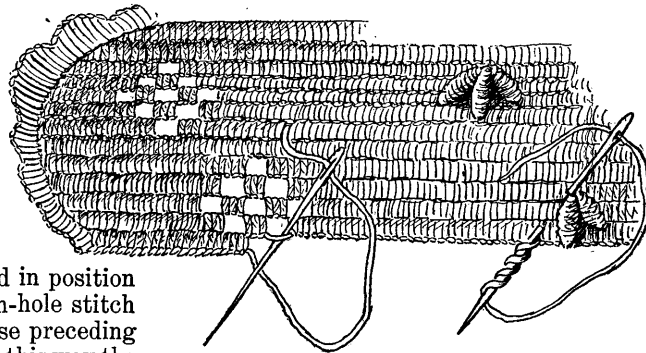


FIG. 4. EXAMPLE OF VENETIAN STITCHES. (ENLARGED EIGHT TIMES.)

stitches, then upon the line following a given number of stitches and missing three, after which the plain line is completed. The next line may be left solid or spaced so as to bring two of the holes in proper position under and on each side of the one first formed. The same principle has been worked out and applied by stocking weavers, in whose products the diamond spacing is often erroneously spoken of as "clocking."

The ornamentation, which will be seen upon the mass of stitches shown in the illustration just described, is a form of raised roll as characteristic of the Venice laces as are the *picots* and button-holed bars. It is the "bullion" stitch, familiarly seen in coarse form on gold embroideries. The method of making is so clearly shown that a detailed description is unnecessary.

When all of the *motifs* that are comprised in the pattern have been made, they are ready to be detached from the sections of parchment on which they have been worked and to be grouped upon the large form of the perfect design. They should be released from the parchment by clipping every stitch of the coarse under thread first laid in. The latter is then carefully pulled out and the finished *motifs* are laid in their respective places upon the large tracing to which they must be lightly but securely basted, and this without allowing the needle to split a single strand of linen. The work that now remains is to connect the detached portions by means of *brides*, either ornamented or plain; by bars, always button-holed; to add the *picots* wherever



FIG. 7. MOTIF TAKEN FROM MODERN ITALIAN LACE HANDKERCHIEF. (ENLARGED SIX TIMES. SEE OCTOBER CHAUTAUQUAN.)

flatter filling stitches into a desirable relief.

An example of open filling stitches many times enlarged is given in the fourth of the accompanying illustrations. It represents the diamond stitch which is made by omitting

they seem desirable, and to finish the edge.

The irregularity of the old hand-made laces could not be better demonstrated than by the example given herewith, reproduced from the specimen in the Metropolitan Museum. Nowhere throughout the original piece is the portion given here repeated. Its chief value to the student, therefore, lies in its rich display of *brides*, or connecting ties; in the typical *motifs* that may be detached and made to serve a similar purpose

for the modern worker, and in the characteristic ornaments seen on the *brides* and in the button-holed edge with its irregularly placed *picots* or loops. The details of this edge are very clearly shown in the illustration given. It is derived from the edges that appear universally on the bone laces of Greece, but in the needle laces of Italy has become infinitely softer and finer. Scarcely an example of old Venetian lace but shows this lower and upper finish that are such marked features of this example, and which are recognized as being as truly characteristic as are the *cordonet* and *picot*.

Forms of the tie or *bride*, as used by modern lace-makers, distinguish the *motif* here shown and which are enlarged from *motifs* that may be found in the

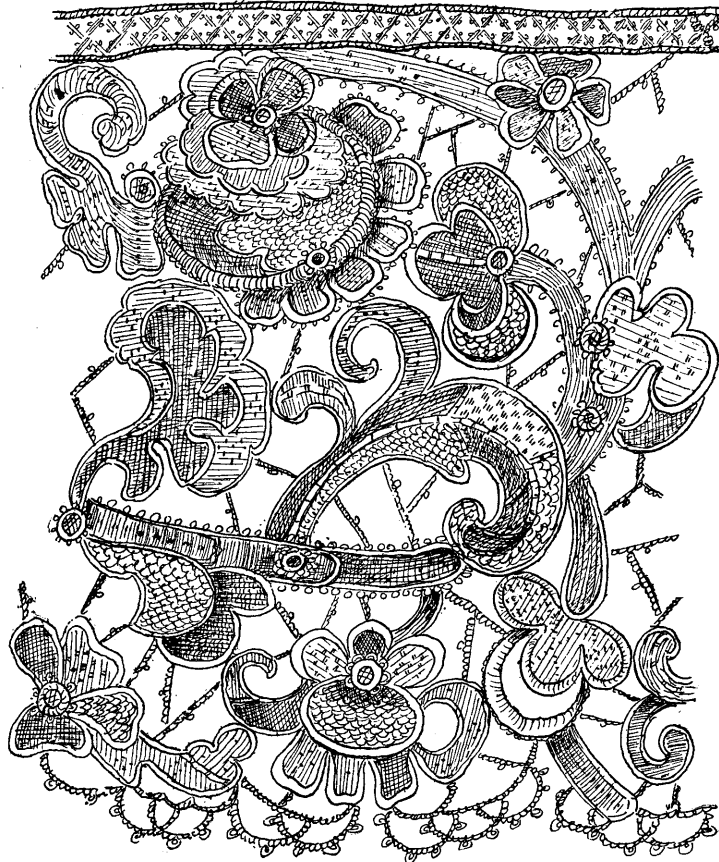


FIG. 5. EXAMPLE OF OLD ITALIAN LACE (FULL SIZE) GIVEN BY MRS. ASTOR TO THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART.

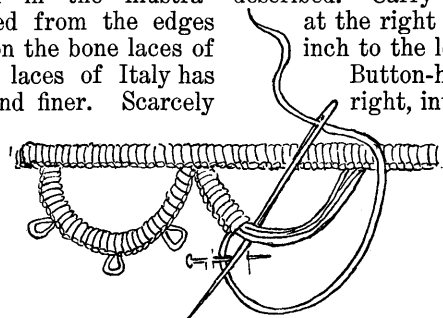


FIG. 6. CHARACTERISTIC BUTTON-HOLED EDGE OF VENETIAN POINTS. (ENLARGED SIX TIMES.)

border of the modern Italian lace handkerchief which was shown in the

October number of THE CHAUTAUQUAN. The flowers include petals done in plain button-hole stitch, varied by others in the open dice squares. The *cordonet*, corded, but not padded, surrounds each flower and defines each *motif*. The elaborated connecting strands are slender Venetian bars button-holed throughout their length. Though referred to as *brides*, the real *brides* are, in fact, merely twisted threads,

much lighter in every way than the worked bar which assumes their name.

The same process is followed in making the edge as in the filling of the leaves before described. Carry the thread from a point at the right to another, one-fifth of an inch to the left, forming a soft loop.

Button-hole stitch it back to the right, intersecting it with the loops

known as *picots*. The latter are formed by winding the thread around the needle one or more times as in the knot stitch. Place the left thumb upon the loops so formed, and draw the needle out, holding the loops down

with the left thumb while drawing the thread taut. The result will be the exquisite feathery *picots* that distinguish the Venetian laces.