



RUINS OF THE CHATEAU DE POLIGNAC, LE PUY.

The Lace-Makers of Le Puy.



AS is the decay of beautiful industries from an economic point of view, the gradual perversion of taste thereby indicated is a fact more melancholy still. Just as hand-plaited straw may now be called a survival, only one or two old women now remaining of the unrivalled plaiters of Dunstable, so the lace-making of Le Puy, once as elegant a handicraft as any exercised by women, is in its decadence. I have elsewhere described the changes that have taken place in the straw trade at Luton, owing to the introduction of cheap Chinese plait and machinery; more interesting from an artistic point of view, since the lace that trims a bonnet is a work of art, which the bonnet can hardly be, is the transformation that has come over the time-honoured lace trade of France.

In itself, Le Puy, *chef lieu* of the department of the Haute Loire, is well worthy of a visit: no town, perhaps, throughout all France savours more of antiquity, which is saying a good deal; and none is more picturesque, which is saying more still.

Travellers would do well to time their approach by daylight, otherwise they will wake up in view of a commonplace boulevard, and have to go out in search of romance, which is hardly the way to be exhilarated by it. As a general rule French towns should be fallen over head and ears in love with at first sight, not courted after due deliberation and fixed motives, as

oftentimes are French beauties. The surprise that this ancient capital of the Velay gives us when we come upon it on a sudden is not to be forgotten and not to be bought, *impayable*, as our neighbours say. For the moment, it seems difficult to believe that these lofty pyramids and airy pinnacles of stone rising so abruptly from the plain can be anything else but the laboriously piled-up monuments of man, for where else has Nature disported herself so freakishly? No less sharply defined than the great pyramids and the Sphinx, and although on a smaller scale, hardly less surprising are the rocky eminences crowned by the ancient town and venerable old cathedral, the fantastic pile of Corneille, and shooting up vertically towards the sky, the airy pinnacle of St. Michel. On the Rocher de Corneille, for reasons best known to themselves, the citizens of Le Puy have erected a colossal Virgin, gilt from head to foot, which, however much it may minister to the exaltation of the pious, cannot be said to improve the landscape. In striking contrast with the gently undulating *entourage* of green plain is this array of dark volcanic rocks, here a solid, fortress-like mass, there a monolith hardly more substantial than Cleopatra's Needle. A warm, cloudless September sky heightens to the utmost the strangely romantic outlines and brilliant colouring of the landscape.

The old town with its narrow, sunless streets and antiquated hotels, is very curious, and not over-healthy, judging from the poor physique and pallid looks of the population generally. Seldom in France is seen so much

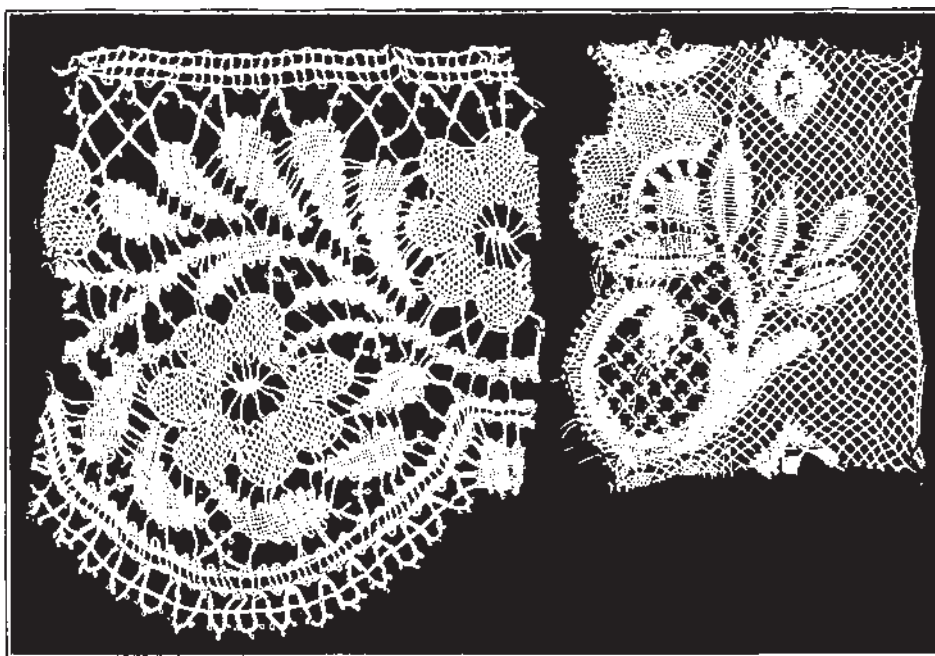
lameness and deformity. The lameness is easily accounted for, the steep, almost perpendicular ways of the ancient quarter being paved with sharp pebbles, very fatiguing and injurious to the feet. Glimpses of these narrow streets permitting of a hand-shake between window and window, and the overhanging roofs, dark walls, and bit of blue sky overhead, recall ancient cities of Italy and the East.

At every doorway in the old town you still see the lace-makers at work, and striking pictures many of them make. The younger are not ill-favoured, and what good looks they possess are set off to the best advantage by the charming coiffe of the country, a butterfly-like lace or muslin cap adorned with a large top-knot of a kind of ribbon made for the purpose, rich in quality and elaborate in design.

The older women, less given to personal adornment,

the market, but the staple industry of Le Puy now consists of the former kind, and indeed may almost be said to have supplanted the other. What a degeneration! To realise the beauty, finish, and elaborateness of torchon lace in its most flourishing epoch we must visit the *Musée de Dentelles* of Le Puy, but our illustrations will suffice to bring out the contrast.

Nos. 1 and 2 are specimens of the better kinds of lace still made and sold from five shillings a yard upwards, whilst Nos. 3 and 4 give a very fair notion of the staple article of commerce, the cheap, durable lace for which the makers receive twopence a yard and the purchasers pay fivepence, leaving no large margin of profit for the exporter. Yet inferior as are the cheaper kinds, they have much to recommend them, and it is sad to learn that they in turn are being driven out of the market by the



TORCHON LACE, NOS. 1 AND 2.

have frequently that withered, hag-like look, interesting to the lover of the picturesque, but not engaging to the general beholder. They croon together, hardly looking up as they busily ply their reels, the most pathetic incarnation of laboriousness and patience imaginable. In the market-place, on the steps of the churches, and before their doors, you see these indefatigable lace-makers, one and all, like the venerable straw-plaiters of Dunstable, survivals of an industrial—rather, an artistic—phase passing away. And just as the decay of the straw trade at Luton has affected the prosperity of the entire county, so has the decadence of hand-made lace at Le Puy had a most serious effect on the material well-being not only of the town but of the neighbouring villages, indeed of the entire department. No reader of these pages can be unfamiliar with what is called torchon lace, that cheap, durable, thread lace, sold at every draper's shop for sixpence and upwards a yard. More elaborate and expensive kinds still find their way into

caprices of taste, ill-directed economy, and the encroachments of machinery. When the lace trade flourished at Le Puy, ladies indulged in a flounce, scarf, or shawl of rich torchon or guipure, which, like a jewel, was the ornament and possession of a life-time, a heritage to bequeath to others. The lace-makers then easily earned from five shillings upwards a day, and it was a proverb in the country that the men minded the house and babies whilst the women supported the family. Now-a-days costly hand-made lace is little patronised in France; according to present fashion, instead of the collar and cuffs of a lady's gown being trimmed with rich lace, or indeed lace of any kind, dressmakers supply odiously stiff and unbecoming edgings of beads, and tinsel or ribbon ruchings. This fancy will doubtless pass away, but the love of cheap finery amongst all classes militates against the revival of hand-made lace. You may still see peasants in Auvergne, Brittany, and Vendée wearing coiffes trimmed with elaborate guipure or old point; in

most cases these are heirlooms, and the coiffe itself is rapidly giving place to the bonnet.

Nevertheless, on the principle that half a loaf is better than no bread, wherever you go you find patient women plying their reels, their fingers taking up the threads with the swiftness and precision of machinery. A good deal of *passementerie* or ornamental gimp in black



LACE-WORKER OF LE PUY.

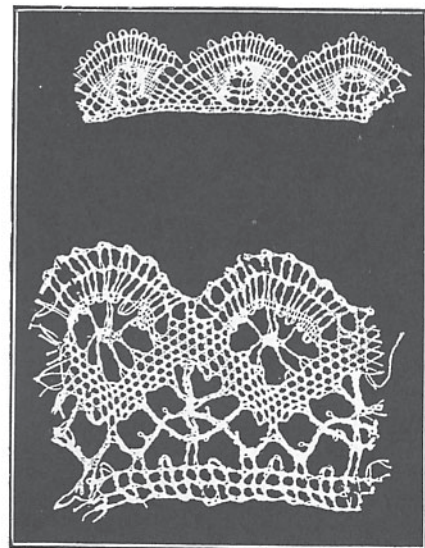
silk or thread is also made here, this, as well as lace-making, being done in great measure by housewives after attending to domestic duties. A living is hardly to be made by the lace-pillow or gimp-card now-a-days.

The *Musée de Dentelles* of Le Puy offers a rare treat to lovers and connoisseurs of lace. The effect of these delicate and truly artistic productions may be likened, to compare great things with small, to that of a sculpture gallery; perhaps a better comparison still were a cabinet of carved ivories. Nothing to be called colour meets the eye, nothing to dazzle or bewilder, only hues negative and restful as the vellum of some ancient manuscript, or the time-stained marble of a frieze, and in harmony with these, the daintiest artistic fancies ever made subservient to personal adornment. Here we see not only specimens of the torchon and guipure of Le Puy, but laces of various countries and epochs, historically arranged, many indeed being relics as valuable from an historic as an artistic point of view. No one can study such *chefs-d'œuvre* of taste and skill without a feeling of regret. The stately, elaborate ornamentation that in former days made the dress of both sexes so beautiful, has given way to frippery and tinsel that often mean moral degradation. To say nothing of working women who must needs follow the latest fashion imitated in the

most trumpery materials, let me give a hint to the class above them. Women possessed of modest means as well as duchesses might wear a bit of good lace if they chose. It is a passion for novelty and the consequent craving for over-cheapness that has brought about a deterioration of taste, the result of which is the stagnation of the lace trade. But although the effects of this depression have been so seriously felt at Le Puy, few evidences of absolute want meet the eye. If French people fail in one thing they have recourse to another. Thus an old woman, keeping a stall in the market-place, told me that in her youth she used to earn five shillings a day by making point d'Alençon. Now she plied her reels at the cheap torchon instead, eking out her means by a fruit and cake stall.

The city of Le Puy reminds me of some antiquated piece of battered plate, set in a brand-new case of green velvet. Around it stretches the fertile, beautifully cultivated plain, patchwork of meadows and cornland, the air scented with newly-mown hay, the landscape fresh and verdant as in April. On all sides you see little homesteads and cheerful peasants busy in the hayfield or preparing the land for sowing.

Towering above this sweet pastoral country, a few miles from the town, is the famous château of Polignac, as fine a feudal ruin as any in France. Both on the way thither and from the château itself you get wonderful views of this strange country, the masses of dark volcanic formation in striking contrast with the verdure on every side. The ruins cover a vast, lofty pile of black rock, so steep as to be only reached from one side. The place is doubly a fortress, these formidable towers and buttresses being raised on a natural rampart of



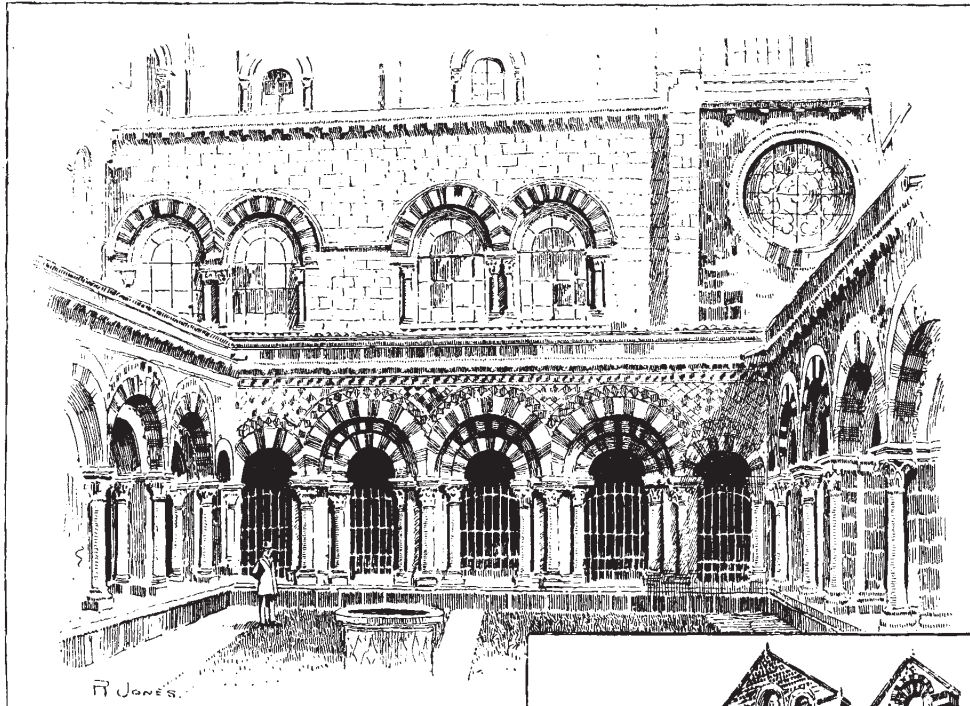
TORCHON LACE, NOS. 3 AND 4.

basaltic rock. A farm-house has been built within the ruins, and the farmer's daughter acts the part of cicerone to strangers. We found her sitting in the sun with two friends (single women, like herself), who stayed there, as she said, to keep her company. In the summer months, when tourists occasionally broke the monotony of the

day, life was bearable ; but in winter the solitude was dreadful. These three women, plying their lace and gimp-work, offered a curious study. One was a mystic, whose mind was occupied with abstruse metaphysical and theological questions. After chatting pleasantly for a while, she said, "It grieves me to think that

She showed us the neat room she occupied with her friends, chatted about the tourists who came in summer, the solitude of winter, and always in the same light-hearted strain.

I bought some lace of the mystic (No. 3 in the specimens), and came away with the painful thought.

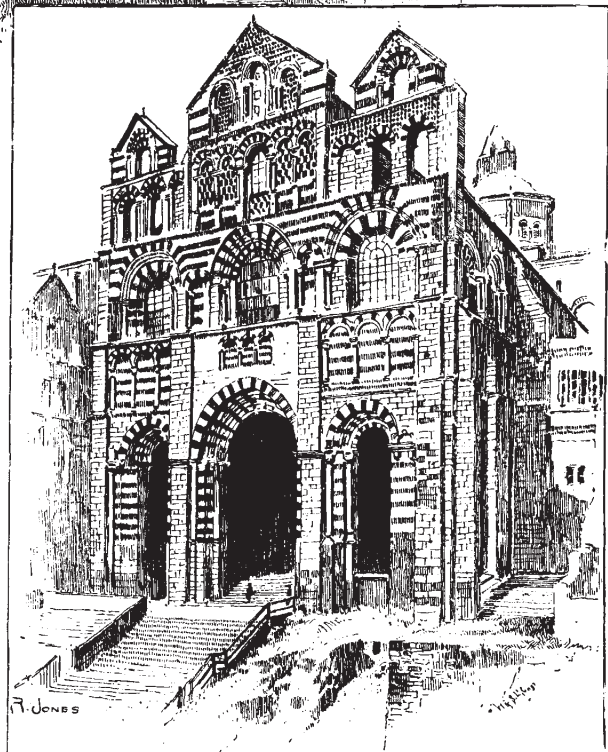


THE CATHEDRAL CLOISTERS, LE PUY.

you are a Protestant. Your society pleases me ; I should have liked to meet you in heaven. Won't you reflect on the matter and study the dogmas of our religion? You would see how superior it is to yours." I laughingly rejoined, "So long as the world lasts, you will never get all mankind of one opinion on such subjects. Do not, therefore, be unhappy about what no earthly power can prevent." "Ah," she sighed, "you follow no commandments ; you have no confession." "Pardon," I replied ; "we obey the Law of Moses, and confess to God. There is no real reason why we may not meet in a better world." This seemed to set her thinking, although the look of wistful uncertainty did not wholly pass from her face.

The second of the trio was of an inquiring turn, but in a wholly different field. "I am weary of existence here," she said. "I want to see other countries and other modes of life. Take me with you to England as your maid. I can sew, cook, and keep a house in order. Do take me!" "Can you speak English?" I asked. "Alas! not a word." "Then," I replied, "I fear it would be no kindness to take you to England. You would be home-sick ; you would feel yourself an exile." She, too, reflected pensively.

The third was of another calibre. Vivacious, accommodating herself to circumstances, without originality, she was the most cheerful and contented of the three.



FAÇADE OF THE CATHEDRAL, LE PUY.

how doubtful a gift is oftentimes a spirit of inquiry—the aspiration after the unknown! The wistfulness of the two women made me melancholy.

Throughout the entire department of Le Puy the lace-pillow is plied in winter, when the labours of the

field cease. Women meet together at each other's houses, and work in company. It is calculated that a hundred thousand lace-makers are at work in good seasons, that is to say, when the lace is in demand.

I have mentioned the extreme richness and beauty of the ribbons used as trimming for the coiffe. Ribbon-weaving is also a woman's industry, and a visit to St. Étienne—seat of the ribbon manufactory—is hardly less interesting than that to Le Puy itself. The journey, moreover, by rail is inconsiderable—about three hours only—and lies through a deeply interesting geological country. If the condition of the rural population of France, for the most part, is such as to awaken wonder and admiration, a less favourable impression is produced by many manufacturing towns. St. Étienne, for example, has undergone a fate similar to that of Le Puy. The great ribbon trade, dating from the Middle Ages, has declined there, just as the lace trade has declined in the capital. Thus we learn that the average earnings of a workman (or *passementier*, as the ribbon-weaver is called) are not above three francs a day. Two francs daily form the maximum earnings of women, be it remembered, who give their whole time to the loom. Just as torchon lace is made by women in their own homes, the manufacturers furnishing the thread and the pattern, so the ribbon-loom is plied at home, the hours of labour being from seven a.m. to seven p.m., with intervals for meals. Two or three francs a day for ten or eleven hours' toil! No wonder that the ribbon-weaving population of St. Étienne have a pale, pinched look, strangely out of keeping with the brightness and beauty of their productions.

In the poorest little haberdasher's shop you may find veritable gems of the ribbon-weaver's skill; but in the *Musée de Rubans* are specimens only to be described as works of art. If the *Musée de Dentelles* of Le Puy may be compared to a cabinet of carved ivories, the *Musée de Rubans* may be likened to a collection of enamels. From every side flash upon you colours deep and rich and dazzling as those of tropic birds and butterflies. Every imaginable variety of design, colour, and texture is to be found here: gorgeous Oriental arabesques, flowers and birds raised in satin on a delicate silk ground, vignettes in silk, to say nothing of rich ribbons for ordinary use in which some novelty or other is constantly being achieved. In fact, to discover what an artistic and captivating thing ribbon may be, we must visit the *Musée de Rubans* of St. Étienne. The brilliant

hues of the peacock's tail, the delicate gradations of colour in a sea-shell, the gorgeousness of gold and gems, the bright petals of flowers, are all here imitated by the ribbon-weaver's loom. Unfortunately here, as at Le Puy, deterioration of taste has resulted in a stagnation of trade. People will have cheap, common ribbons, as well as cheap, common lace, and it naturally follows that whilst the cheaper article is inferior in every way, the lowness of the price at which it is sold reduces the ribbon-weaver's profit to the minimum. Other causes must also be taken into account. Lyons is now a formidable rival in the ribbon trade, and manufactories have also been set up in other parts of the country.

Here let me offer a suggestion which must occur to any one visiting the *Musée de Rubans*. Why are not ribbons of rich texture and elaborate design substituted for the plumage of birds in ladies' headgear and dresses? Why should not the odious practice of exterminating innocent and beautiful creatures to the interests of vanity be given up for once and for all, since human inventiveness has here found a substitute? There is nothing that the skilled ribbon-weaver of St. Étienne cannot effect with his loom *à la Jacquard*; let us then be satisfied with his achievements, and leave the birds and butterflies for the delight of generations to succeed us.

Some notion of the importance of the ribbon trade of St. Étienne may be gathered from these facts: the silk yearly consumed in the manufacture represents a sum-total of forty-five million francs; that represented by the ribbon itself, a hundred millions. In fairly good seasons forty thousand weavers of both sexes ply the loom. As I have mentioned, the ribbon-weavers, like the lace-makers, work in their own homes. In some large manufactories, however, two or three looms may be seen worked together by machinery, and in time an entire revolution of this kind may be looked for.

No tourist should pass by St. Étienne without paying it a visit. Uninviting as the town appears from the railway, it is found cheerful on closer inspection. In the heart of its dingy streets may be seen those coquettishly arranged squares and public gardens peculiar to French towns, miniature Trocadéros, with fountains and flower-beds, and of course a stand for musicians. The townspeople, too, are affable and courteous to strangers, and—let me add, for the benefit of those who merely stop here for an hour or two—excellent tea is to be had at the buffet.

E. BETHAM-EDWARDS.

