

[From Dickens's Household Words.]

THE BELGIAN LACE-MAKERS.

THE indefatigable, patient, invincible, inquisitive, sometimes tedious, but almost always amusing German traveler, Herr Kohl, has recently been pursuing his earnest investigations in Belgium. His book on the Netherlands has just been issued, and we shall translate, with abridgments, one of its most instructive and agreeable chapters;—that relating to Lace-making.

The practical acquaintance of our female readers with that elegant ornament, lace, is chiefly confined to wearing it, and their researches into its quality and price. A few minutes' attention to Mr. Kohl will enlighten them on other subjects connected with what is to them a most interesting topic, for lace is associated with recollections of mediæval history, and with the palmy days of the Flemish school of painting. More than one of the celebrated masters of that school have selected, from among his laborious countrywomen, the lace-makers (or, as they are called in Flanders, *Speldewerksters*), pleasing subjects for the exercise of his pencil. The plump, fair-haired Flemish girl, bending earnestly over her lace-work, whilst her fingers nimbly ply the intricately winding bobbins, figure in many of those highly esteemed representations of homely life and manners which have found their way from the Netherlands into all the principal picture-galleries of Europe.

Our German friend makes it his practice, whether he is treating of the geology of the earth, or of the manufacture of Swedish bobbins, to begin at the very beginning. He therefore commences the history of lace-making, which, he says, is, like embroidery, an art of very ancient origin, lost, like a multitude of other origins, "in the darkness of by-gone ages." It may, with truth, be said that it is the national occupation of the women of the Low Countries, and one to which they have steadily adhered from very remote times. During the long civil and foreign wars waged by the people of the

Netherlands, while subject to Spanish dominion, other branches of Belgic industry either dwindled to decay, or were transplanted to foreign countries; but lace-making remained faithful to the land which had fostered and brought it to perfection, though it received tempting offers from abroad, and had to struggle with many difficulties at home. This Mr. Kohl explains by the fact that lace-making is a branch of industry chiefly confined to female hands, and, as women are less disposed to travel than men, all arts and handicrafts exclusively pursued by women, have a local and enduring character.

Notwithstanding the overwhelming supply of imitations which modern ingenuity has created, *real Brussels lace* has maintained its value, like the precious metals and the precious stones. In the patterns of the best bone lace, the changeful influence of fashion is less marked than in most other branches of industry; indeed, she has adhered with wonderful pertinacity to the quaint old patterns of former times. These are copied and reproduced with that scrupulous uniformity which characterizes the figures in the Persian and Indian shawls. Frequent experiments have been tried to improve these old patterns, by the introduction of slight and tasteful modifications, but these innovations have not succeeded, and a very skillful and experienced lace-worker assured Mr. Kohl, that the antiquated designs, with all their formality, are preferred to those in which the most elegant changes have been effected.

Each of the lace-making towns of Belgium excels in the production of one particular description of lace: in other words, each has what is technically called its own *point*. The French word *point*, in the ordinary language of needlework, signifies *stitch*; but in the terminology of lace-making, the word is sometimes used to designate the pattern of the lace, and sometimes the ground of the lace itself. Hence the terms *point de Bruxelles*, *point de Malines*, *point de Valenciennes*, &c. In England we distinguish by the name *Point*, a peculiarly rich and curiously wrought lace formerly very fashionable, but now scarcely ever worn except in Court costume. In this sort of lace the pattern is, we believe, worked with the needle, after the ground has been made with the bobbins. In each town there prevail certain modes of working, and certain patterns which have been transmitted from mother to daughter successively, for several generations. Many of the lace-workers live and die in the same houses in which they were born, and most of them understand and practice only the stitches which their mothers and grandmothers worked before them. The consequence has been, that certain *points* have become unchangeably fixed in particular towns or districts. Fashion has assigned to each its particular place and purpose; for example:—the *point de Malines* (Mechlin lace) is used chiefly for trimming night-dresses, pillow-

cases, coverlets, &c.; the *point de Valenciennes* (Valenciennes lace) is employed for ordinary wear or negligé; but the more rich and costly *point de Bruxelles* (Brussels lace) is reserved for bridal and ball dresses, and for the robes of queens and courtly ladies.

As the different sorts of lace, from the narrowest and plainest to the broadest and richest, are innumerable; so the division of labor among the lace-workers is infinite. In the towns of Belgium there are as many different kinds of lace-workers as there are varieties of spiders in Nature. It is not, therefore, surprising that in the several departments of this branch of industry there are as many technical terms and phrases as would make up a small dictionary. In their origin, these expressions were all Flemish; but French being the language now spoken in Belgium, they have been translated into French, and the designations applied to some of the principal classifications of the workwomen. Those who make only the ground, are called *Drocheleuses*. The design or pattern, which adorns this ground, is distinguished by the general term "the Flowers;" though it would be difficult to guess what flowers are intended to be portrayed by the fantastic arabesque of these lace-patterns. In Brussels the ornaments or flowers are made separately, and afterward worked into the lace-ground; in other places the ground and the patterns are worked conjointly. The *Platteuses* are those who work the flowers separately; and the *Faiseuses de point a l'aiguille* work the figures and the ground together. The *Striqueuse* is the worker who attaches the flowers to the ground. The *Faneuse* works her figures by piercing holes or cutting out pieces of the ground.

The spinning of the fine thread used for lace-making in the Netherlands, is an operation demanding so high a degree of minute care and vigilant attention, that it is impossible it can ever be taken from human hands by machinery. None but Belgian fingers are skilled in this art. The very finest sort of this thread is made in Brussels, in damp underground cellars; for it is so extremely delicate, that it is liable to break by contact with the dry air above ground; and it is obtained in good condition only, when made and kept in a humid subterraneous atmosphere. There are numbers of old Belgian thread-makers who, like spiders, have passed the best part of their lives spinning in cellars. This sort of occupation naturally has an injurious effect on the health, and, therefore, to induce people to follow it, they are highly paid.

To form an accurate idea of this operation, it is necessary to see a Brabant Thread-spinner at her work. She carefully examines every thread, watching it closely as she draws it off the distaff; and that she may see it the more distinctly, a piece of dark blue paper is used as a background for the flax. Whenever the spinner notices the least unevenness, she



stops the evolution of her wheel, breaks off the faulty piece of flax, and then resumes her spinning. This fine flax being as costly as gold, the pieces thus broken off are carefully laid aside to be used in other ways. All this could never be done by machinery. It is different in the spinning of cotton, silk, or wool, in which the original threads are almost all of uniform thickness. The invention of the English flax-spinning machine, therefore, can never supersede the work of the Belgian fine thread spinners, any more than the bobbinet machine can rival the fingers of the Brussels lace-makers, or render their delicate work superfluous.

The prices current of the Brabant spinners usually include a list of various sorts of thread suited to lace-making, varying from 60 francs to 1800 francs per pound. Instances have occurred, in which as much as 10,000 francs have been paid for a pound of this fine yarn. So high a price has never been attained by the best spun silk; though a pound of silk, in its raw condition, is incomparably more valuable than a pound of flax. In like manner, a pound of iron may, by dint of human labor and ingenuity, be rendered more valuable than a pound of gold.

Lace-making, in regard to the health of the operatives, has one great advantage. It is a business which is carried on without the necessity of assembling great numbers of workpeople in one place, or taking women from their homes, and thereby breaking the bonds of family union. It is, moreover, an occupation which affords those employed in it a great degree of freedom. The spinning-wheel and lace-pillows are easily carried from place to place, and the work may be done with equal convenience in the house, in the garden, or at the street-door. In every Belgian town in which lace-making is the staple business, the eye of the traveler is continually greeted with pictures of happy industry, attended by all its train of concomitant virtues. The costliness of the material employed in the work, viz., the fine flax thread, fosters the observance of order and economy, which, as well as habits of cleanliness, are firmly engrafted among the people. Much manual dexterity, quickness of eye, and judgment, are demanded in lace-making; and the work is a stimulator of ingenuity and taste; so that, unlike other occupations merely manual, it tends to rouse rather than to dull the mind. It is, moreover, unaccompanied by any unpleasant and harassing noise; for the humming of the spinning-wheel, and the regular tapping of the little bobbins, are sounds not in themselves disagreeable, or sufficiently loud to disturb conversation, or to interrupt the social song.

In Belgium, female industry presents itself under aspects alike interesting to the painter, the poet, and the philanthropist. Here and there may be seen a happy-looking girl, seated at an open window, turning her spinning-wheel or working at her lace-pillow, whilst at

intervals she indulges in the relaxation of a curious gaze at the passers-by in the street. Another young *Speldewerkster*, more sentimentally disposed, will retire into the garden, seating herself in an umbrageous arbor, or under a spreading tree, her eyes intent on her work, but her thoughts apparently divided between it and some object nearer to her heart. At a doorway sits a young mother, surrounded by two or three children playing round the little table or wooden settle on which her lace-pillow rests. Whilst the mother's busy fingers are thus profitably employed, her eyes keep watch over the movements of her little ones, and she can at the same time spare an attentive thought for some one of her humble household duties.

Dressmakers, milliners, and other females employed in the various occupations which minister to the exigencies of fashion, are confined to close rooms, surrounded by masses of silk, muslin, &c. They are debarred the healthful practice of working in the open air, and can scarcely venture even to sit at an open window, because a drop of rain or a puff of wind may be fatal to their work and its materials. The lace-maker, on the contrary, whose work requires only her thread and her fingers, is not disturbed by a refreshing breeze or a light shower; and even when the weather is not particularly fine, she prefers sitting at her street-door or in her garden, where she enjoys a brighter light than within doors.

In most of the principal towns of the Netherlands there is one particular locality which is the focus of lace-making industry; and there, in fine weather, the streets are animated by the presence of the busy workwomen. In each of these districts there is usually one wide open street which the *Speldewerkers* prefer to all others, and in which they assemble and form themselves into the most picturesque groups imaginable. It is curious to observe them, pouring out of narrow lanes and alleys, carrying with them their chairs and lace-pillows, to take their places in the wide open street, where they can enjoy more of bright light and fresh air than in their own places of abode.

"I could not help contrasting," says Kohl, "the pleasing aspect of these streets with the close and noisy workrooms in woolen and cotton manufactories. There the workpeople are all separated and classified according to age and sex, and marshaled like soldiers. Their domestic and family ties are rudely broken. There chance or exigency separates the young factory girl from her favorite companions, and dooms her to association with strangers. There social conversation and the merry song are drowned in that stunning din of machinery, which in the end paralyzes even the power of thought."

Our German friend is a little hard upon factory life. Though not so picturesque, it does not, if candidly viewed, offer so very unfavorable a contrast to that passed by the Belgian Lace Workers.