



ALENÇON AND ARGENTAN LACE PART I BY M. JOURDAIN

"Fashion is to France what the Mines of Peru are to Spain."
—Colbert.

"Il est une déesse inconstante, incommode,
Bizarre dans ses goûts, folle en ses ornements,
Qui paraît, fuit, revient and renaît en tout temps
Protégée était son père, et son mom est la mode."
—Voltaire.

FRANCE, "all clinquant, all in gold," was the first court of Europe in its extravagant consumption of lace under the Medicis and Valois. The geometric laces of the period bordered the cuffs of the "escadron volante," and the "mignons frisés and fraisés" of Henri III.; and with his own hand, the king adjusted the plaits of his ruff with poking-sticks. By 1579, the ruffs of the French court were "intolerably large, being a quarter of a yard deep, and twelve lengths in a ruff," as Stowe writes. They are described as "gadroned like organ-pipes, contorted or crinkled like cabbages, and as big as the sails

of a windmill," so that the wearers could scarcely turn their heads. So absurd was their effect, that the journalist of Henri III. declares they "looked like the head of John the Baptist on a charger." The Reine Margot, seated at dinner, was compelled to send for a ladle, with a handle two feet in length, to eat her soup, and when, in 1579, Henri III. appeared in his "courtly ruff" at the fair of St. Germain, he was met by a riotous band of students of the city of Paris, decked out in large paper ruffs, crying "à la

fraise on connoit le veau," for which impertinence the King sent them to prison. Finally the "English Monster" (as it was called in France) gave way to the *rabat*, or turn-down collar, with its deep-scalloped border of rich point. The turned-back cuffs to match are trimmed in the same manner, and the fashion even extended to boot-tops — of which lace-trimmed boots, the favourite, Cinq Mars, left three hundred pairs on his death in 1642. The contemporary engravings of Callot and Abraham Bosse are eloquent of the prodigal



JEAN BAPTISTE COLBERT (1619-83) (He wears a collar of Italian point)

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fashion of the day. Never was lace so largely worn. Not only the boots, cuffs, and collars, but the garter was trimmed with a fringe of point, the roses on the shoes were of lace, and the glove was fringed and finished with metal or thread-lace. The "Foolish Virgins," in a contemporary picture, weep in lace-trimmed handkerchiefs, and the table-cloth of the Rich Man, as well as his dinner-napkins, are similarly adorned.

Lace of gold and metal was also lavishly used: of the guard on the occasion of the French queen's entry into the city of Lyons in 1600, the chief captains were all attired alike: their garments garded with gold parchment lace. "The coronall marched before them, mounted on a mightie courser, barded and garded with gold lace, himself aparelled in blacke velvet all covered with golde parchement lace." The characteristic edict of Henri IV. is directed against this excessive use of gold lace and galon: "Nous faisons défense à tous habitants de porter ni or ni argent sur les habits, excepté aux filles de joie et aux filous, à qui nous ne prenons pas assez d'interêt pour nous inquieter de leur conduit."

After the marriage of Louis XIII. in 1615, edict follows edict to curb this extravagance and the luxury of lace, and to recommend plain linen. The caricatures of the period immortalise the Protest of the Court against this Puritan simplicity. One of them represents a lady of fashion, with her laces discarded, weeping over her plain bordered linen, and lamenting:—

"Quoique j'aye assez de beauté
Pour assurer sans vanité
Qu'il n'est point de femme plus belle,
Il me semble pourtant à mes yeux
Qu'avec de l'or et la dentelle
Je m'ajuste encore bien mieux."

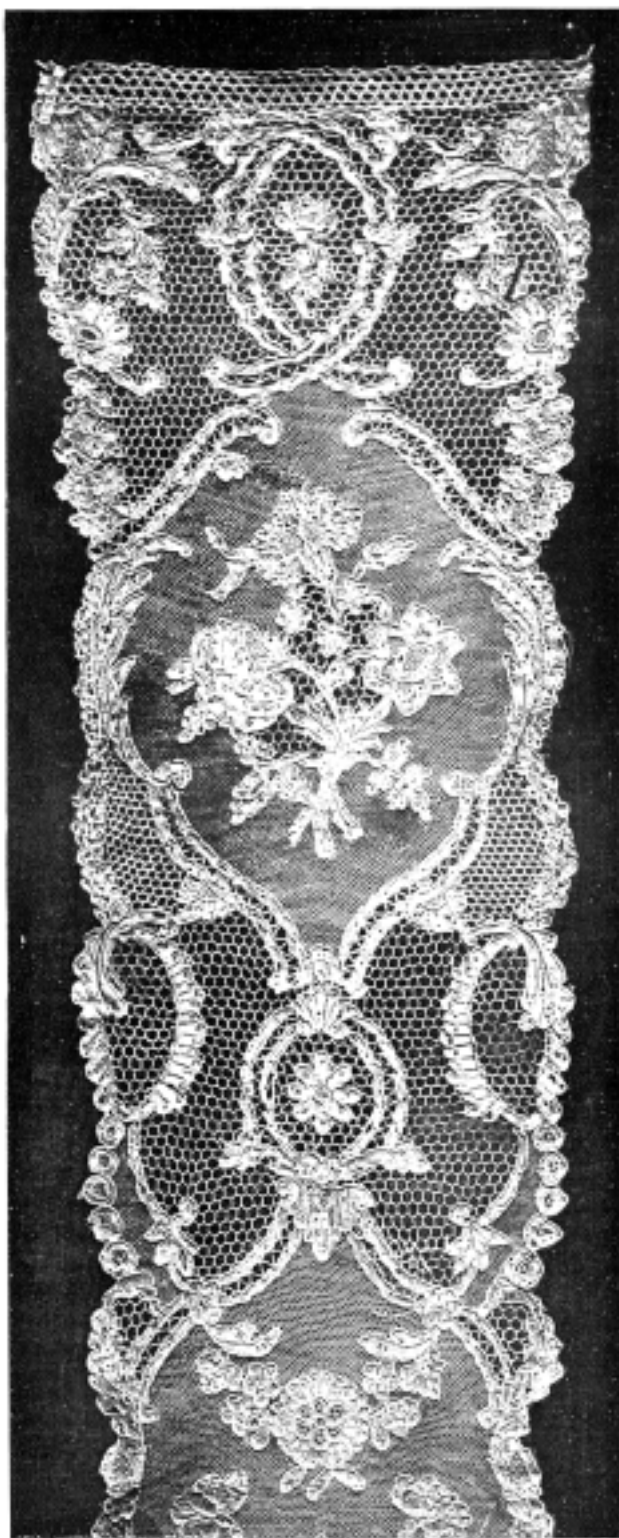
Fresh sumptuary ordinances were issued in the reign of Louis XIV., which were, according to Molière, very grateful to the oppressed husbands of the day.

"Ah! trois et quatre fois soit béni cet édit,
Par qui des vêtemens de luxe est interdit;
Les peines des maris ne seront pas si grandes,
Et les femmes auront un frein à leurs demandes.
Oh! que je sais au roi bon gré de ses décrets."

This charitable ordinance prohibits all foreign "passemens," or any French laces exceeding an inch in width, and proceeds to attack the dangling knee-frills of the day:

"Ces grands canons, où comme des entraves,
On met tous les matins les deux jambes esclaves."

Their use is now forbidden, unless made of plain linen, or of the same stuff as the coat, unadorned



POINT D'ALENÇON EIGHTEENTH CENTURY PERIOD, LOUIS XV. SHOWING IN COMBINATION THE ALENÇON RÉSEAU AND THE ARGENTAN HEXAGONAL BRIDES WIDTH, $4\frac{1}{2}$ INCHES

The Connoisseur

with lace. The canons naturally soon disappeared, and in 1682 they had passed entirely out of fashion, or fallen into the "domaine du vulgaire."

These sumptuary ordinances had but little effect on the consumption of lace in France, and many edicts are issued, in 1660 and the following years, with repeated prohibitions of the points of Genoa and Venice. The minister of Louis XIV., the "Grand Colbert," therefore, wisely adopted other measures. In 1661 the death of Mazarin allowed him to take the first place in the administration; new industries were established, inventors protected, workmen invited from foreign countries, French workmen absolutely prohibited to emigrate. He also determined to develop the resources of France, and to implant factories of lace which should rival those of Italy and Flanders, judging, as he declared to his king, that "there will always be found fools enough to purchase the manufactures of France, though France should be prohibited from purchasing those of other countries."

He therefore applied to Monseigneur de Bonzy, Bishop of Béziers, then ambassador at Venice, who replied that at Venice "all the convents and poor families make a living out of this lace-making," and recommends sending from Venice some lace-workers from the best Venetian houses to teach the girls of France. Monseigneur de Bonzy's suggestion bore fruit, and a few years later Colbert was able to write to M. le Comte d'Avaux, who succeeded de Bonzy as ambassador at Venice, "I have gladly received the collar of needle-point lace worked in relief that you have sent me, and I find it very beautiful. I shall have it compared with those new laces being made by our own lace-makers, although I may tell you beforehand that as good specimens are now made in this kingdom." Alençon, an old lace-making centre, was chosen as the seat of the new manufacture; where the lace industry was already wide-spread among the peasants, "a manna, and a veritable benediction from the heavens which has spread over the country," as the intendant of Alençon writes; and where old men and children earned their bread by their art, and shepherdesses worked at their lace in the fields while herding their flocks.

At Alençon, then, Colbert established his thirty Venetian workwomen, whom he had brought to France with great expense, and, as the tradition runs, settled at the château of Lonrai. In a short time, his forewoman, Madame Gilbert, it is said, arrived at Paris with the first specimens of the new lace; and the king, inspired by Colbert with a desire to see the work, during supper at Versailles, announced to his courtiers he had just established a manufacture of

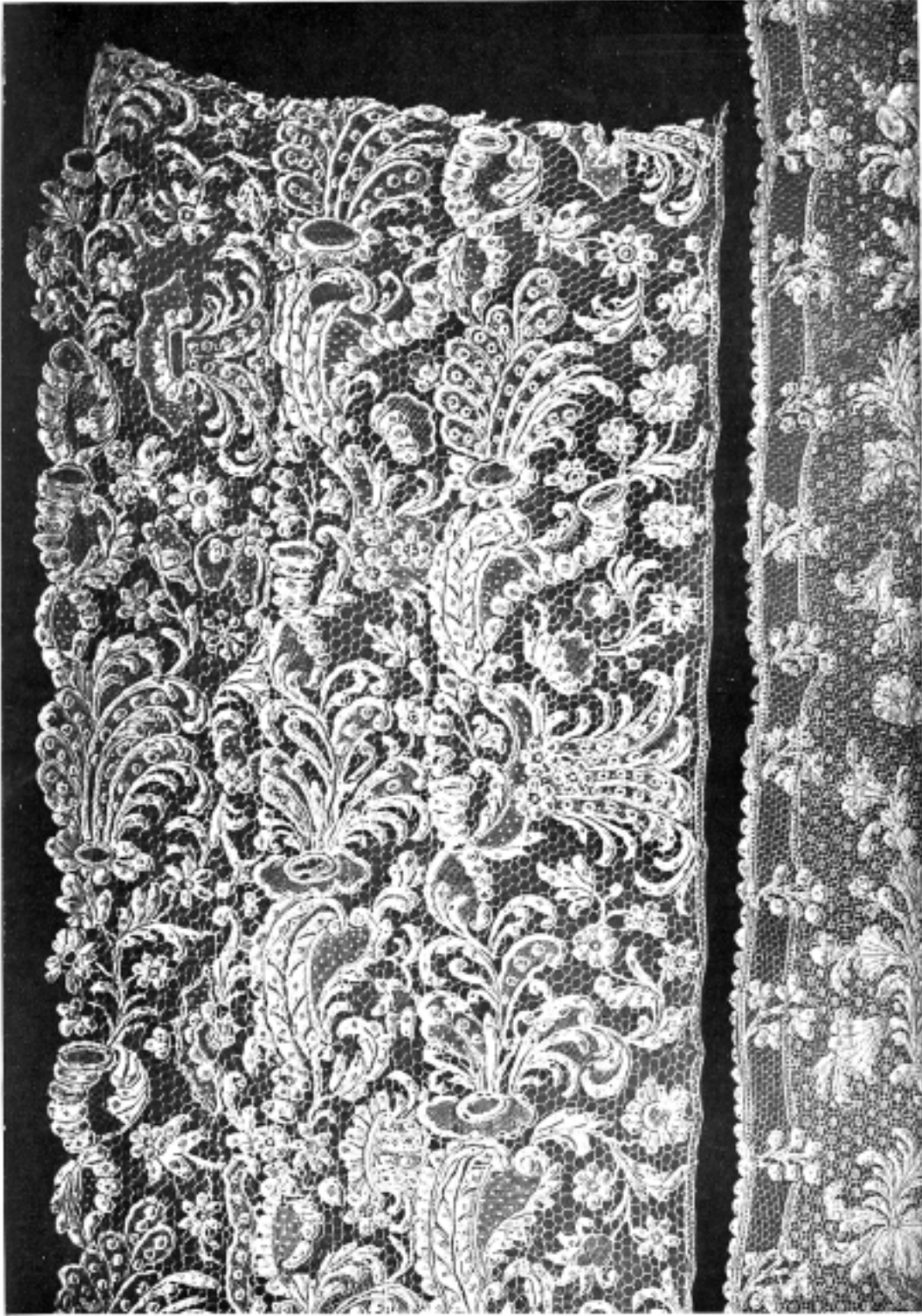
point more beautiful than that of Venice, and appointed a day when he would inspect the specimens. The laces were artistically arranged over the walls of a room hung with crimson damask, and shown to the best advantage. The king expressed himself delighted. He ordered a large sum to be given to Madame Gilbert, and desired that no other laces should appear at court except the new fabric, upon which he bestowed the name of Point de France. Scarcely had Louis retired than the courtiers eagerly stripped the room of its contents. The approval of the monarch was the fortune of Alençon: "Point de France adopted by court etiquette, the wearing of it became compulsory. All who had the privilege of the 'casaque bleue'—all who were received at Versailles, or were attached to the royal household—could only appear, the ladies in trimmings and head-dresses, the gentlemen in ruffles and cravats of the royal manufacture."

Whatever truth the story may contain, it is however proved by Madame Despierres, in her exhaustive *History of Alençon Point*, that the Château of Lonrai came into the family of Colbert fourteen years after the establishment of the lace industry at Alençon, and the name of Gilbert is not found in any of the documents relating to the establishment of Point de France, nor in the correspondence of Colbert.

An ordinance of August 15th, 1665, founded upon a large scale the manufacture of Points de France, with an exclusive privilege of ten years; a company was formed, and the manufacture realised enormous profits until 1675, when the privilege ceased. The difficulties met by the great "ministre de la paix" were enormous, and are curiously illustrated in his correspondence. He appears to have met with a pathetic obstruction on the part of the town authorities, and rebellion on the part of the lace workers, who, according to Catherine Marcq, the *maitresse dentellière*, preferred the old stock to the new work, and frequently quitted her establishment after working there a month. The monopoly of the privileged workpeople displeased the old work-women,* who, on one occasion, revolted, as the intendant Favier Duboulay writes to Colbert: "One named Le Prevost, having given suspicion that he was about to set up an establishment of *ouvrages de fil*, the women to the number of above one thousand assembled and pursued him, so that if he had not taken refuge in the intendant's house, he would assuredly have suffered at their hands."

* "It is a fact that for many years the town of Alençon subsists only by means of these small works of lace that the people make and sell" (*Favier Duboulay to Colbert*, Aug. 15, 1665).

(To be continued.)



POINT D' ARGENTAN. EIGHTEENTH CENTURY. PERIOD, LOUIS XV.
THE UPPER BORDER HAS BEEN PIECED TOGETHER. WIDTH, 7 INCHES
THE LOWER BORDER SHOWS THE *RESEAU ROSACE* GROUND