

A WORD ON THE OUTLOOK OF LACE-MAKING IN IRELAND.

THE production of the needle-point laces presented by the Catholic hierarchy to the Pope, on the occasion of his Jubilee, marks, as it were, a new era in Irish lace-making (to which Mrs. Power Lalor has referred in the preceding article, and on behalf of which she pleads so eloquently), and the publication of facsimiles of these laces offers an opportunity for giving some account of what has recently been done to raise the standard of the Irish branch of the art.

In the first place, it may be well to state that lace-making in Ireland is a domestic or cottage industry. The mass of the lace-makers work in their own homes—cabins for the most part of rough stone whitewashed, and thatched often most rudely. It would be invidious to compare these really primitive dwellings, often situated in the wildest of country districts, with the trim houses and cottages of many of the French and Flemish lace-makers, though the Irish cabin is possibly as comfortable a dwelling as the fisherman's hut at Burano, in which his wife or daughter makes her lace. But whether in Ireland or Burano, such domestic conditions, under which lace-making is more or less equally pursued, are obviously open to improvement, and efforts directly or indirectly tending towards it are peculiarly welcome in a part of this kingdom.

One of the causes which has jeopardised the prosperity of lace-making in Ireland has been the comparative absence of competent supervision in the production of the work. So far as the workers in their own homes are concerned, they have been left to go on producing articles from traditional patterns, which deteriorate in course of repetition. The commercial agents who collect the stocks from such workers very naturally regulate their negotiations by buying up what they think will be saleable. And it has been no part of their business to undertake duties like those of the master-mind in a manufactory. Some demand exists for lace made in a rough and ready way; but it is becoming quite apparent that the poor and limited encouragement given by mere trading is inadequate to the higher and better development of the industry.

The distress which has largely affected and continues to seriously bear upon the lace-makers in Ireland has for many years appealed to the hearts of kindly persons living in the vicinity of the lace-makers' cabins; and individual attempts of philanthropy have accordingly been directed to diminish this distress. But kindheartedness alone cannot succeed. To try to create a market for goods whose claims to public consideration are chiefly of a senti-

mental character, does not of itself contain the necessary elements of vitality for an industry. Nevertheless, for some time this has been the ruling spirit which has stimulated the operations not only of sympathetic individuals but also of conventual communities.

From the earliest days of lace-making in Europe, convents have been associated with the industry. And although it is an open question whether Irish convents laid the seeds of the industry which has grown up within the century, it is probably unquestionable that the bulk of the best lace produced in Ireland has come out of convents or work-rooms supervised by nuns. The provision of work-rooms in which lace-makers may work in comfort is almost entirely due to the convents. From the mere fact that these rooms outlast successive generations of lace-makers, a continuity of conventual interest in the work has more or less been secured. Out of this continuity of interest, which is obviously of high importance, it seems likely that an organisation for the improvement of Irish lace-making is to take root and extend.

At the Cork Exhibition of 1883 a section was reserved for the display of Irish laces. Notwithstanding that many important centres, such as those situated in the north of Ireland, were not contributors to it, the collection on the whole fairly represented the capabilities of the Irish lace-maker. It required no long scrutiny to discover that, whereas there were plentiful evidences of great manual dexterity, there was a poverty in those artistic features which contribute to beauty of effect in laces. It was no new discovery, but the Cork Exhibition accentuated it; and some few of the convents, to whom it was communicated by the promoters of the exhibition, readily recognised it, and applied themselves to collecting information upon the steps to be taken to remedy the defect. Foremost amongst the means through which the application of this remedy could be attempted were the forms of help given by Government to promote instruction in drawing and designing patterns, as well as study of standard specimens of European lace-making throughout all periods, from the sixteenth century onwards. It is unnecessary here to describe all that subsequently took place. How a few of the leading convents arranged to form classes under the instruction of the head-master of the Cork School of Art; how they obtained the loan of specimens of old laces from the South Kensington Museum; how they fell in with a system of inspection, &c.; how they earned grants from the Department of Science and Art, and won prizes in the annual national competitions for medals, &c., which

are open to all the schools of art in the United Kingdom—all this is fitly recorded in blue-books presented to Parliament. The upshot, however, is that slowly but apparently quite surely a generation of lace-pattern designers is coming to the fore; and the Papal Jubilee lace is one of several artistic and beautiful Irish laces, the production of which is leavening the depression which had so nearly killed the industry.

An important point to note in connection with these classes at the convents, is that many of the members of the various communities are employed in supervising the lace-makers in the convent work-rooms. Consequently they are, or, at least, should

be, thoroughly acquainted with the technical limitations of the several lace-making processes, and accordingly know what combinations of forms and effects can be successfully produced by the lace-makers.

The adoption by a few of the leading lace-making convents in Ireland of the above-mentioned system, by which instruction in drawing and designing patterns is pursued and skill developed, dates from 1884. It can hardly be considered to have as yet firmly and generally established itself. The convents which have allied themselves with the Department of Science and Art have undergone, in some instances, the test and stimulus of not more than three annual examinations, in others of only two or one; but the results have been officially pronounced to be satisfactory, and, with the continuance of similar efforts, there is no presumption in saying that an ampler display of improved results may be forthcoming. This condition, of course, is dependent upon the energy and application of the convents.

Now, as soon as it became apparent that the importance of instruction in drawing and making new patterns for the lace-makers had been accepted by the convents as worthy of serious attention—fully as serious as that given to instruction in writing and grammar—a private Committee was formed. This Committee proposed to raise a sum of £500 in order (1) to offer prizes for the production of designs for

the various classes of Irish lace; (2) to select, with the advice of recognised authorities, a dozen or more suitable patterns; (3) to order, with a guarantee of payment to the workers, specimens of lace from such patterns executed by picked lace-workers in various districts; (4) to exhibit those specimens in some public institution in London, Dublin, Belfast, Cork, and elsewhere; and (5) to make photographs of those specimens for circulation to subscribers to the fund and to dealers in lace. Not more than £300, however, has been raised during the three years the Committee has been in existence; and the larger portion of this sum has been spent in money



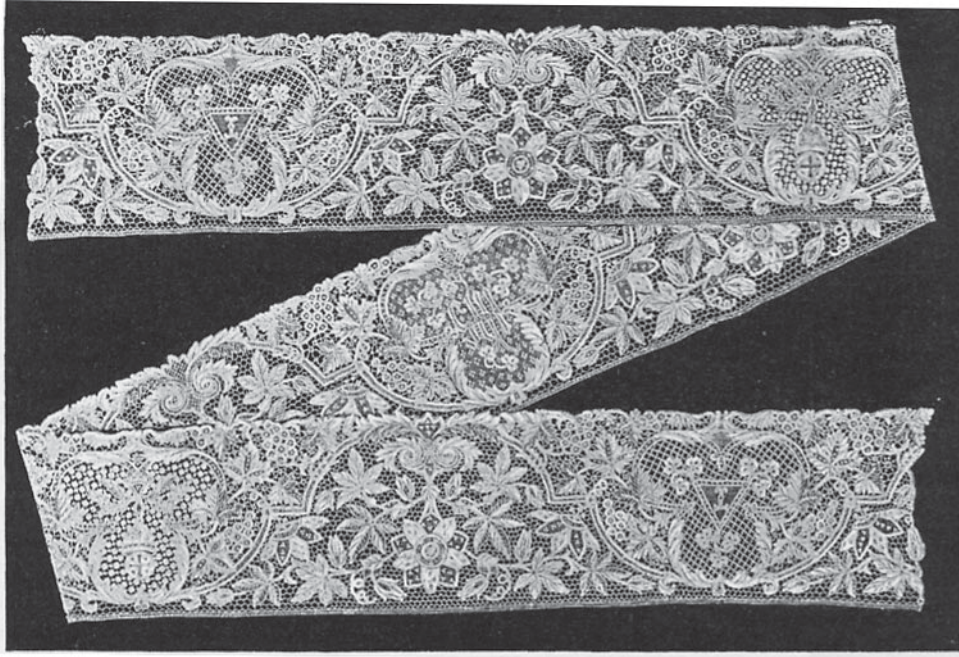
CUFF OF NEEDLE-POINT LACE FOR AN ALB OR ROCHET.

prizes offered during three successive years for competition amongst designers. Several of the prize designs have been worked as private orders for her Majesty the Queen, the Countess of Aberdeen, Lady Dorothy Nevill, Mrs. Alfred Morrison, and others. These specimens, it is hoped, may form the nucleus of an exhibition to be held in due course. In the meantime a number of less costly examples of Irish lace are being made at various centres for the Committee.

Although the Committee already mentioned could not propose to concern itself with regular trading operations, still, from the accounts which have been received, it is peculiarly interesting to note that the improvement in the sales of Irish lace at several small centres has been marked, and coincident with the Committee's endeavours, special and limited in scope as they have necessarily been; it has been clearly proved that a hitherto somewhat neglected talent has been successfully called into play, and is able to supply well composed patterns for the use of workers. How far this is to be further developed depends upon the enterprise of those whose business it is to keep the Irish lace market in a state of liveliness in responding to and stimulating demand. These persons, however, are constrained to consult their own interests; and, looking at matters from a business point of view, they naturally pay greater

attention to producing laces which can be saleable at what may be termed popular prices.

work of art, I would suggest his applying to either of the convents at Kenmare and Youghal for advice



TRIMMING OF NEEDLE-POINT LACE FOR AN ALTAR-CLOTH.

I hope to refer to this subject generally in a later article. In the meantime, if anyone wishes to procure Irish lace for any purpose worked from a special design, and is willing to pay for it as a special production, I would suggest his applying to either of the convents at Kenmare and Youghal for advice in the matter. Others who are content with less special productions will have no difficulty in finding London, Dublin, and Belfast dealers ready to supply their wants.

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