LACE BOBBINS

THE beauty of lace-making as an accomplishment to be desired by all "noble and virtuous women" is delicately suggested in the quaint title of Vicellio's pattern book published in Venice in 1600, in which the author, addressing his patrons, describes the art as the "corona" of all feminine attainment!

These books, which were the outgrowth of an increasing demand for the fabric, were in all probability designed for women of the nobility, a luxury far beyond the means of the humble—

> "Cottager who weaves at her own door
> Pillow and bobbins all her little store,
> Content though mean, and cheerful if not gay,
> Shuffling her threads about the livelong day:
> Just earns a scanty pittance, and at night
> Lies down secure, her heart and pocket light." [1]

Elaborate patterns such as are found in the sixteenth-century lace books indicate that the industry at that date was already well established; patterns must have existed long before they were published in book form, for lace requiring the intricate manipulation of so large a number of bobbins could hardly be produced by the untrained fingers of a novice.

In Italy, where the art developed side by side with that of the needle, the earliest mention of pillow lace is recorded in a Milanese deed of gift dated 1493, which refers to "a band of work wrought with twelve bobbins to trim a sheet." [2]

Ordinary Italian bobbins are of wood, as the name fuselli implies, although in olden times they were made of various materials: *a fusi*, of

[1] Cowper. [2] Lefebure, "Embroidery and Lace" p. 261.

wood; *a ossi*, of bone; *a piombini*, of lead. The name *piombini*, indicating as it does a leaden weight, suggests the possible development of the bobbin from weights used in the primitive loom. The elaborate glass bobbins found in Italy and Spain, which have an opening left in the larger end, originally designed it is said to carry a weight, may have some connection with the term *piombini*. Those shown in the illustration (Nos. 4 and 7) from the collection of Mrs. DeWitt Clinton Cohen came from Murano, where similar specimens are preserved in the Museo Civico, to which Museum they were presented by Signor Toso, grandfather of the present proprietor of the local glass works. They are of clear Venetian glass, decorated with lines of ruby red. One in the Moore Collection of Spanish Glass in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and another equally interesting found in Granada several years ago by a New York collector, are of dark green paste, such as is supposed to have come from Almeria.

These bobbins while highly decorative are scarcely practicable; they measure nine inches in length with the smaller end twisted in a spiral groove and the heavier end richly ornamented with scrolls or knobs in high relief. The large dimensions suggest that an occasional bobbin of this kind may have been used to hold the coarser thread which sometimes outlines the pattern in pillow laces. Pillows are usually fitted with two sets of bobbins, "passive" and "active"; the former, sometimes called "gimps" or "hangers," carry the warp threads through which the "active" bobbins carrying the weft threads are passed, and the necessity for holding these "warp" threads taut might account for the weighted bobbin which finds its prototype in the primitive loom weights as above stated. As different styles of bobbins are often used to indicate the various threads, possibly these large glass bobbins carried the warp threads; for they are certainly too heavy and cumbersome to allow of rapid handling, and it does not seem possible that any great number could be employed on an ordinary pillow.

In the lace centres of the Abruzzi, Aquila, Pescocostanzo and Gessopalena, the pillows, which are large and barrel-shaped, are fitted with slender pear-shaped bobbins, sometimes without ornament or again prettily carved. The same is true in the environs of Genoa as, for instance, in the little town of Pontorfino, where a flourishing lace industry is carried on.

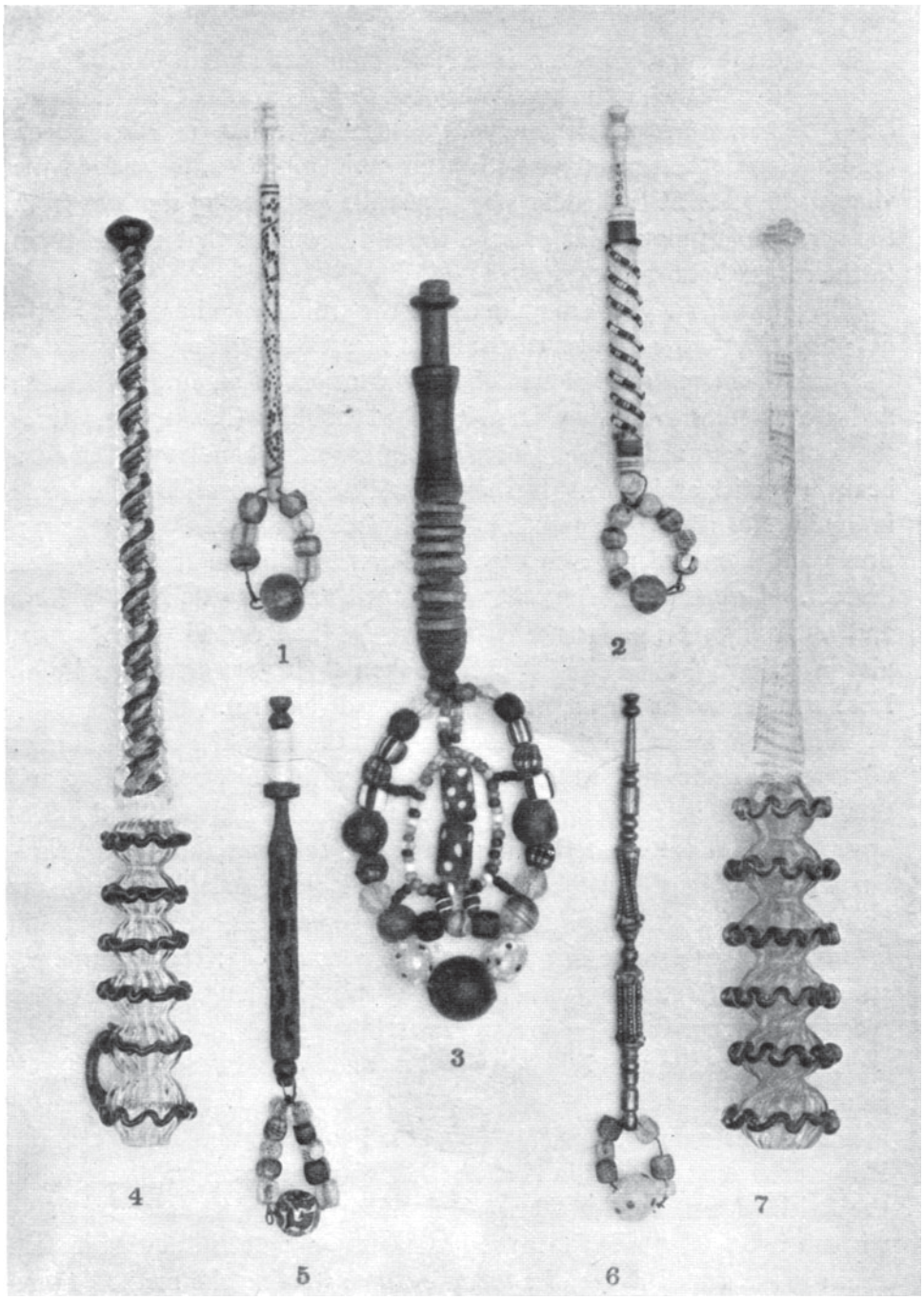

PLATE I

1, 2, 5, 6 English (Midlands). Lent by Miss Gertrude Whiting. 1, 2,; bone 5, walnut; 6, brass.

3 English (Buckinghamshire), walnut. In the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

4, 7 Italian. Glass bobbins from Murano. Lent by Mrs. De Witt Clinton Cohen.

Beyond the Alps, however, in Savoie, one finds an entirely different outfit. Here in the picturesque valley of the Isère nestles the little hamlet of Tignes, where nearly every home shelters a lace maker; and on bright afternoons they gather with their curious pillows, to work in the village square or at their door steps until the lengthening shadows from the surrounding mountains presage the early twilight that recalls them to their household tasks.

The pillows in Tignes are quite out of the ordinary and are apparently designed simply for narrow edgings and insertions. They are made in the form of a large ring, almost of the dimensions of an automobile tire, and are fitted with curious large-knobbed bobbins (No. 17) cut from the root of boxwood, a wood which from constant handling takes on a beautiful polish and color. In shape these bobbins resemble those found in Spain (No. 18), which are usually of Spanish walnut. Walnut, pear, prune and boxwood are also used for Swiss bobbins in the Neufchâtel district, where the bobbins are pear-shaped and very delicate in form and outline, with slender necks for carrying fine thread. In Austria, also in Italy and some other countries, the bobbins are often fitted with loose wooden covers for protecting the thread (No. 10).

Pillow lace in Russia is said to date from the time of Peter the Great who, returning from the Netherlands, took with him lace patterns and established the industry in some of the villages of the central and southern districts, a statement that is more or less substantiated by the similarity between Flemish bobbin laces and the laces of Balakhna, which are quite different from other Russian laces. The bobbins, which are devoid of ornament, reflect the simplicity of the peasant life; they are merely straight, smooth sticks of wood, six or seven inches long, adapted to the coarser fabric produced by peasant work.

Evidence of the use of bobbins in England dates back to the days of Henry VI and Edward IV, although the term "lace" as used in documents of this period is generally supposed to indicate a cord or braid. However that may be, in one of the Harleian manuscripts preserved in the British Museum, directions are given for making "Bascon lace . . . without bobbins." [1] The manuscript opens with a beautiful illumination showing the seated figure of a woman demonstrating the method there-

[1] For this interesting note the author is indebted to Miss Amy Kohlsaat.

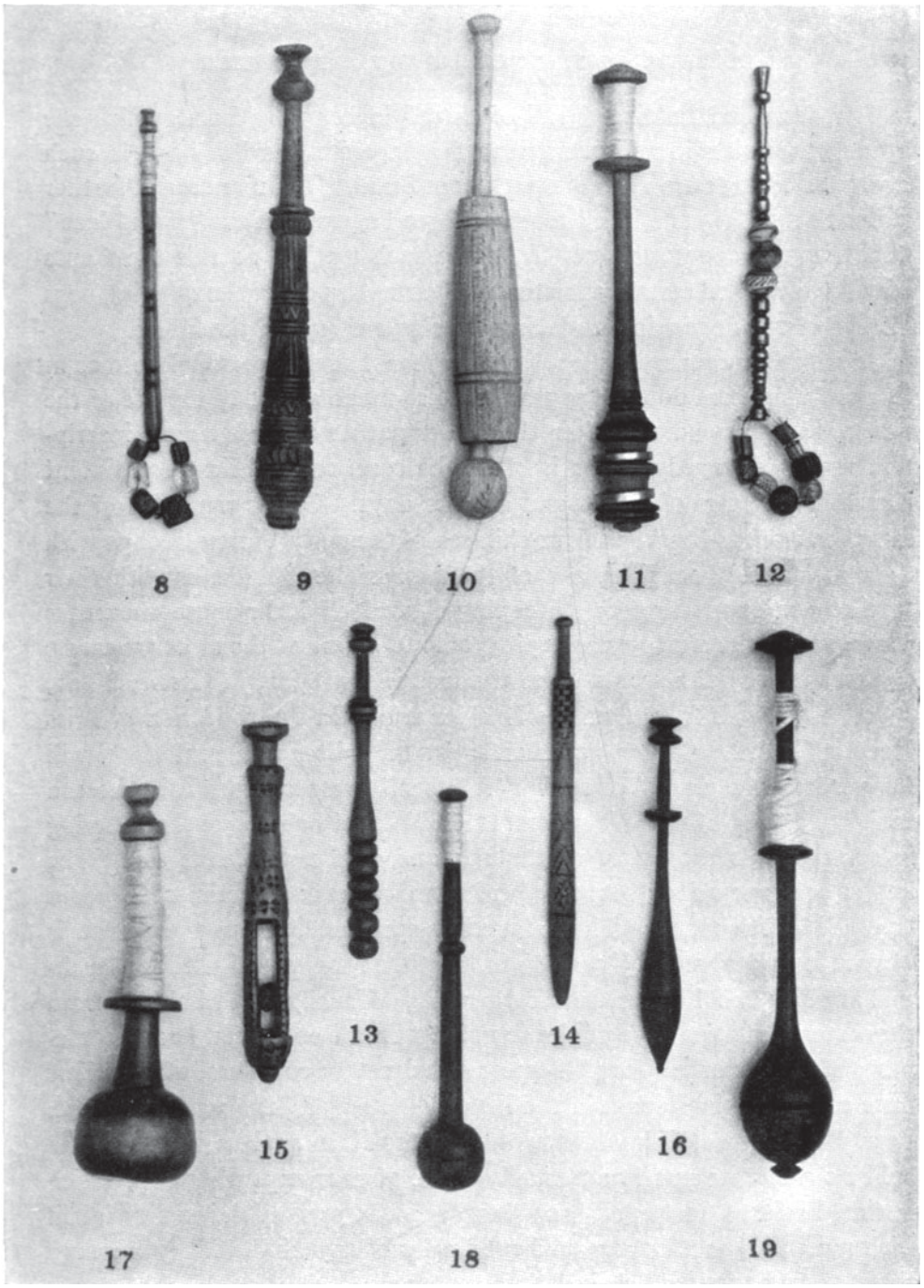

PLATE II

8 English (Midlands), bone; 12, id. bronze.
9 French (Bayeux), carved boxwood.
10 Modern Austrian (Viennese) "barrel" bobbin.
11 French, "méridional" weighted bobbin.
13 Swiss, pearwood; 16, id. walnut.
14 English (Devonshire).
15 Boxwood "window" bobbin.
17 French (Tignes), boxwood root.
18 Spanish, walnut.
19 Belgian, walnut.

8, 17 Lent by Mrs. De Witt Clinton Cohen.
10 to 16, 18, 19 Lent by Miss Gertrude Whiting.
9 In the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

inafter described, holding a ball of thread in her right hand, which she apparently twists in and out among the fingers of her left hand in such a way as to produce an indented lace or braid. The manuscript further states that a "thynne lace" requires three fingers, while a "round lace" might require four or more. By some such method as this the Copts may have worked certain varieties of their nets, possibly employing pegs instead of the fingers in interlacing the single thread of the fabric.

In no other country do lace bobbins reveal such a personal note as in England; nowhere do they appear to be so much a part of the life of the worker as here, where so often the tender pathos of some simple inscription marks a tragedy or, as is often the case, some delicate sentiment records a romance of earlier and happier days. One is reminded of the samplers worked by the patient children of the early Victorian days with their melancholy couplets, and of the memorial embroideries with their tombstones supporting the drooping figures of lachrymose mourners posed within the shadow of weeping willows! One of the most gruesome of these memorial bobbins bears the inscription "Joseph Castle, Hung, 1860." [2] This is from Huntingdonshire and is in the collection of Miss Herbert Oxford. Others, however, suggest a lighter vein, such as "I will forever love the giver," or again, "A token of respect from Alice Lesson to J. B., July 4, 1844." These motto bobbins of bone have the lettering in spiral bands that start at the end and read toward the top. The letters are pricked or burnt in and then colored; sometimes they are "pegged" with metal. The grooved or spool end, where the thread is wound, is only about half an inch in length, as the thread used for Buckinghamshire and Bedford lace is very fine. Usually these bobbins from the eastern counties have jingles or weights on the end, a few beads, sometimes of the "mottled soap" type or of colored or cut glass, while others have coins; but in Devon, in the little villages along the southern coast, Beer, Branscombe, Sidmouth, centres of the Honiton lace industry, the bobbins are quite small and usually made of pear or apple wood, which in time becomes finely polished; they are often prettily painted or inlaid with red and black, but are without jingles of any kind. They measure about three or four inches in length (No. 14).

Another variety of English bobbin (No. 3) found in the vicinity of

[2] Head, "Some Notes on Lace Bobbins." "The Reliquary," 1900, p. 172.

Oxford is of turned wood decorated with loose pewter rings or inlay, with bead jingles at the end. These bobbins also have the short thread-spool at the top. Perhaps the most artistic bobbins from this part of England are of the so-called "church window" model, such as are shown in Nos. 5, 15. These have delicately carved pavilions, usually composed of four slender uprights, which enclose revolving balls or other devices.

LACE-MAKER AT TIGNES, FRANCE

When one realizes that much of the English bobbin lace is more or less directly an outgrowth of the Flemish fabric, it seems strange that there is not more similarity in the shape of the bobbins used, for while the English bobbins are straight, slender sticks, like a lead pencil, nearly everywhere on the continent the form is either pear-shaped or bulbous. In Bayeux, for instance, we again find the Flemish form only slightly larger and heavier; a beautiful group of these carved boxwood bobbins is preserved in the collection at the Metropolitan Museum, presented

by Miss Sturges of New York; in this collection will be found also many interesting English bobbins of various types presented by Mrs. James Boorman Johnstone, and as well a number of curious old lace pins with beaded tops, which in Venice were sometimes decorated with ornamental heads in the form of minute birds in Venetian glass.

While until within a few years it has been possible to pick up occasional bobbins in antique shops or, in rare instances, to persuade a lace worker to part with one, the increased interest in the art and the demand for decorative bobbins make it no longer an easy task to locate these treasures. The day is not far distant when they will no longer be in the market and the ambitious lace maker will needs be content with such modern implements for her pillow as may be available in the city shop.

F. M.