

ANTIQUÉ AND MODERN FRENCH LACE.

BY ADA STERLING.

(Illustrated by Louise Willis Snead.)



THE opening of the Alençon schools for lacemaking by Colbert, under Louis the Magnificent, was the death-blow to the manufacture of the delicate products of Italy. From that beginning, in an era of national enterprise — 1685 — to the present, France practically has controlled the lace manufacturing interests of the world, first by establishing lace schools wherever a thriving community existed within its borders, and later by the absorption of Flanders with its industrious cities — Lille, Malines, Valenciennes, etc. Since the invention of the machine, England, Switzerland, and Germany have competed vigorously in the production of the commoner laces; but in the output of fine hand-made laces, notwithstanding the steadily increasing exports of Austria, Ireland, and Italy, France still leads.

To French ingenuity almost entirely is due the diversity of patterns now to be found in the commoner laces of commerce; the substitution of intricate flat stitches for the difficult raised work of the Italian laces, and the combination of machine-made foundation nets and braids with hand-work. Unfortunately, it cannot be said that from an artistic standpoint these changes have been beneficial, although they have lowered the cost of lace products and placed them within the reach of the masses. At the same time the standard has been lowered as markedly as in other industrial lines where machine products for a time have superseded hand-work. For nearly a century, the work of fine lace-making by hand was displaced by the output of the surprising machine, which in its turn is now giving way to laces manufactured in part by hand. Hence the difficulty experienced by the queen and her associates when, several decades ago, they undertook to revive the industry in Italy.

The old lacemakers had disappeared, and scarcely a half-dozen women could be found in the entire country who retained even a shadowy recollection of the process of manufacture of the needlework that had had its part in establishing the glory of that country.

Previous to the time of Louis XIV., the pillow laces of France, repeating the methods followed in contiguous Germany, were generally of stoutish flax or gold thread and the needle points were but a degree finer. Though at no time has Germany excelled in the manufacture of really fine laces, lace schools were a feature of the industrial life of Saxony (still a lace-producing locality) in 1561. In them, pillow lace, not unlike that made in Brussels, was manufactured in great quantities. Thence the industry spread into Dresden, picturesque Nuremburg, and other towns, several of which became famous for their products which often were exported into France. At the expulsion of the Huguenots (or Walloons as they were then known) from the latter country, many of whom represented the artisan class of France, a number of the dispersing refugees fled into the Palatinate. Here, in so far as was possible, they either reëstablished their former trades or adopted those of the protecting country. Torchon lace, which originated there, is still made in quantities in these sections of Germany, and modern specimens of this stout trimming show great precision and beauty of workmanship. As an article of possible fashion, however, the value of Germany's lace product has always been greatly below that made in other advanced European countries and especially that produced in France a hundred years later.

A curious record of the early lace of Germany and of France and a specimen that shows clearly the work of that day, is to be

found upon a pillow or cushion, the pattern partially worked, which is one of the treasures that have come down from the early Huguenot settlers of New Paltz on the Hudson. It is now preserved in the recently opened Memorial House in that quaint town. The pattern is that of an insertion an inch and a half wide, and, though made two centuries ago, the work begun is identical with the Torchon laces that may be purchased at any well equipped shop in American cities today. This relic has been preserved for generations by the descendant families of refugees who came from the Palatinate about 1667.

Of the several finer French laces that established the standard after the latter part of Louis's reign, none has proved of such permanently artistic value as the Alençon and Argentan products, practically alike and latterly sold under the one name of Alençon lace. Unlike the products of the Gobelins factories, established under royal patronage at about the same time, owing to the minute character of the lace when finished, the different conditions that surround its manufacture and the more or less general uses to which, for six hundred years, it has been put, the imitation by the rapid-working machine of such product, a perfect example of which may often be found in a hair ornament or a flimsy jabot, became a comparatively easy matter, especially as the previous supply of the handsome work at no period had equaled the demand for it. More, its great cost made the wearing of lace impossible except among the most wealthy, even persons of moderate means being unable to indulge in any but the simplest ornaments.

Before the conquering machines, therefore, lace making by hand, even in France, was almost obliterated from the list of hand industries. In consequence, the Alençon schools gradually have dwindled in numbers and diminished in importance, and finally, though some still exist, they have become of small commercial value to the country. In the time of Napoleon they were already degenerated, though in order to stimulate interest in the production of fine laces, that

remarkable man is said to have given orders to assemble the old needleworkers of Alençon and to set them to work upon the layette of his heir, and the hangings of the bed of the imperial mother.

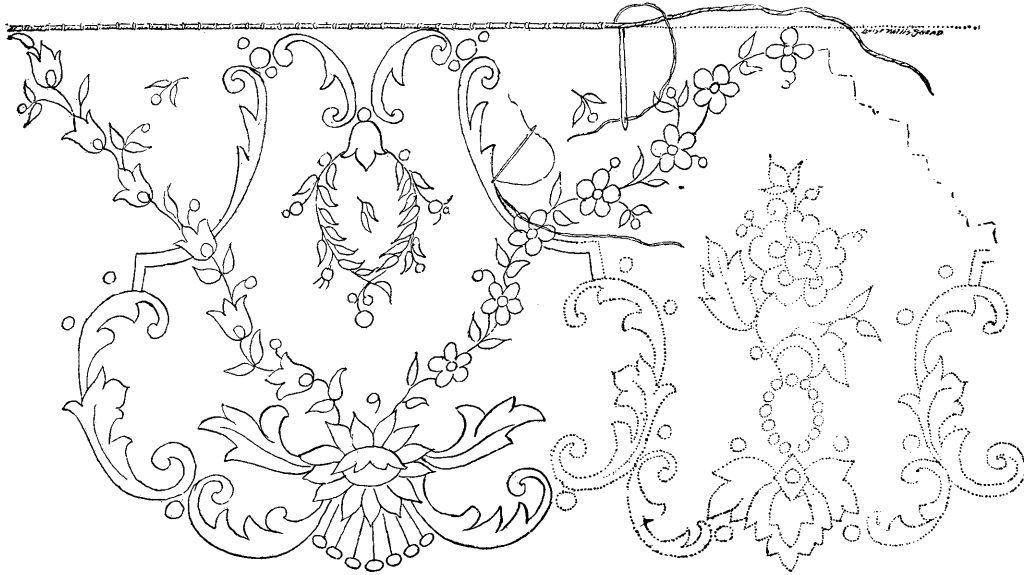
Within the last half century, however, Alençon laces have not failed to excite both the wonder and admiration of connoisseurs. So late as 1867 two flounces were exhibited upon which forty women workers had been engaged for seven years. In these precious fabrics the true ground *reseau* was used; i.e., the entire ground of netted hexagons was worked with the needle and not supplied by woven Brussels net.

The present process of manufacture of Alençon lace differs but slightly from that devised by Mme. Gilbert, the mother of the lace industry in France. The three accompanying illustrations are reproductions of fine lace patterns in various stages of working, as made in the surviving schools at Alençon. The originals are to be seen at the Metropolitan Museum of Art to which they recently have been loaned by Mrs. James Boorman Johnson, a wealthy *amateur* who has made the study of lace practically a life work.

The designs represent respectively the pattern drawn upon parchment that has been perforated regularly throughout, and partly filled in with tracing thread after the same method as has been described in a previous paper;* the filling in of ground stitches and of the netted ground of the *motif* or design itself, and last, the *motif* elaborated to its fullest completion by means of lace, cloth, diamond, and buttonhole stitches. In the Alençon schools, each step herein shown is taken by a separate needlewoman, so that the work passes through many hands before it approaches a finish.

In the earlier products of these schools the ground employed was generally the *bride* or twisted threads that gave such conspicuous grace to the patterns of the Venetian and Spanish laces; but within a comparatively short time the *bride* was discarded

* "The Making of Venice Laces." See December number THE CHAUTAUQUAN.

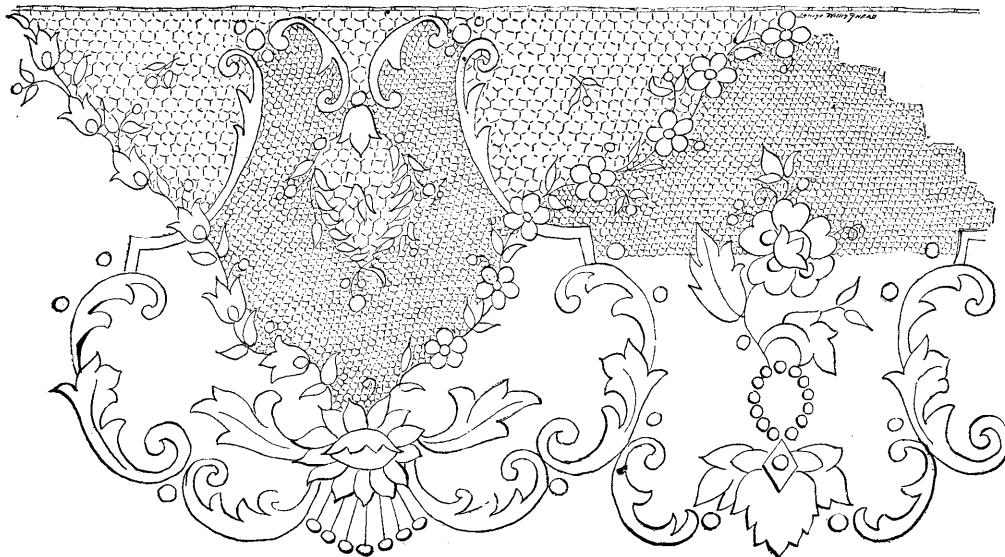


TRUE ALENÇON PATTERN, SHOWING PLAIN DRAWING AND PERFORATED DIVISION. FROM A SPECIMEN NOW IN THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM, NEW YORK.

and the more difficult hexagon ground was substituted. To this innovation, in a large part, may be traced the later depreciation of the Alençon laces; for the hexagon or net stitch, formed originally mainly by the deft manipulation of bobbins, was one of the first lace stitches to fall before the prowess of the machine. Thereafter the substitution of Brussels net, woven by mechanical process, marvelously cheapened as to cost and showing no appreciable cheapness of

quality, because of the rapidity with which the work of making the *motif* might be advanced, became rapidly common among the lacemakers, whose lack of foresight in this instance, afterward became their own undoing.

Artistically inferior, the Alençon lace generally seen today is made over a foundation of ready-made net under which the traced pattern is carefully basted. The working out of the design often calls for the



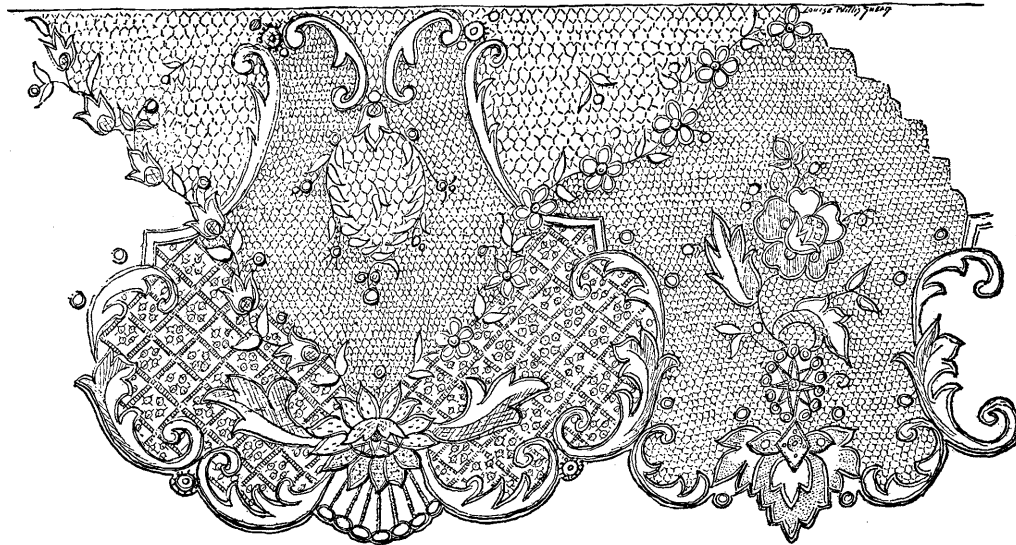
SHOWING THE ABOVE DESIGN PARTIALLY FILLED IN WITH BRUSSELS NET STITCH.

most skilful handling, but consists mainly in attaching the *motifs* cleanly to the ground without overmuch fingering of the same, for by this means the mesh would be pulled out of place.

As in the case of the Venetian lace, the first step in the making of the Alençon lace is the placing of the tracing thread. Modern workers often elect to have the design drawn upon a bright blue, green, or warm brown paper, which may be "stayed" at back with thin muslin to prevent the paper from cracking. The working lace patterns should consist of one complete design, and a second made in sections, as has been

round, over the tracing thread, with fine buttonhole stitch, after which the netted ground is worked. Not until these two degrees in the work have been accomplished does the real beauty of her handiwork begin to appear to the worker.

The netted mesh should now be filled in, after which the introduction of the regular stitches, buttonholed portions, and the *picots* are made, which slightly ornament nearly all available examples of Alençon lace. The last thing to be done is the *cordonné* outer edge, in which the process is identical with that followed in the Venetian lace, though the result differs in effect from that product,



COMPLETED MOTIF, SHOWING WORKED GROUND AND ORNAMENTS.

described, in a previous paper on "The Making of Venice Laces." At the outside, a given section should not exceed seven inches in length and preferably should not measure more than from four to five inches.

The outlines of the pattern must now be pricked carefully, the holes occurring in groups of two, a scarcely perceptible spacing being allowed between each group. Fine linen thread (No. 200 in any of the lace threads found in the local market), taken double, is used as a tracing medium in Alençon lace. This is caught in place with a coarser thread. Every leaf, or spray, or ornament is carefully traced in this way before other stitches are begun. The *motifs* are then worked

because of the finer threads employed for the French lace.

The feature in the making of this lace which presents most difficulty to the untrained worker, is that of forming with exactness the hexagonal or Brussels net ground. Professional lacemakers in the foreign schools begin this netting either from the bottom of the pattern, working upward, or by holding the design upside down and working upward, and by working from right to left, confusing points to the worker until the first forms appear, after which the reason for so working appears. The net ground should be begun at an angle of the pattern in order that the holes may

properly form. This may occur in the outline of leaf or flower or other ornament in the design. Attach the thread to the chosen point and push needle through about a sixteenth of an inch beyond, or less, bringing it out on right side as for a buttonhole, but winding the thread once around the needle so as to form an actual twist. Stitches of the same character may be continued on to the end of the space. Here the thread must be secured in the bordering *motif*, and the worker turns back, stitching over the row of twisted loops she has formed, to the commencement, but twisting the thread twice over the needle. The end of this row having been reached (it may be that it is carried from one *motif* to another), overcast the lace

form to which it is attached, for the space of a sixteenth of an inch. Now proceed as first described to other side, putting each new stitch in the one already formed in lower row, and so on until the ground is filled in completely.

Wherever a heavy effect is desired in Alençon lace, the workers resort to the use of horsehair, a method of stiffening the lower edge or *cordonnnet* which gives a body to it without a serious loss of pliability. A single strand of pure white horsehair is carried along the outline of pattern or edge which is to be raised, and over this the fine buttonhole stitch is worked which completes the important lower edge of all the heavier laces.