



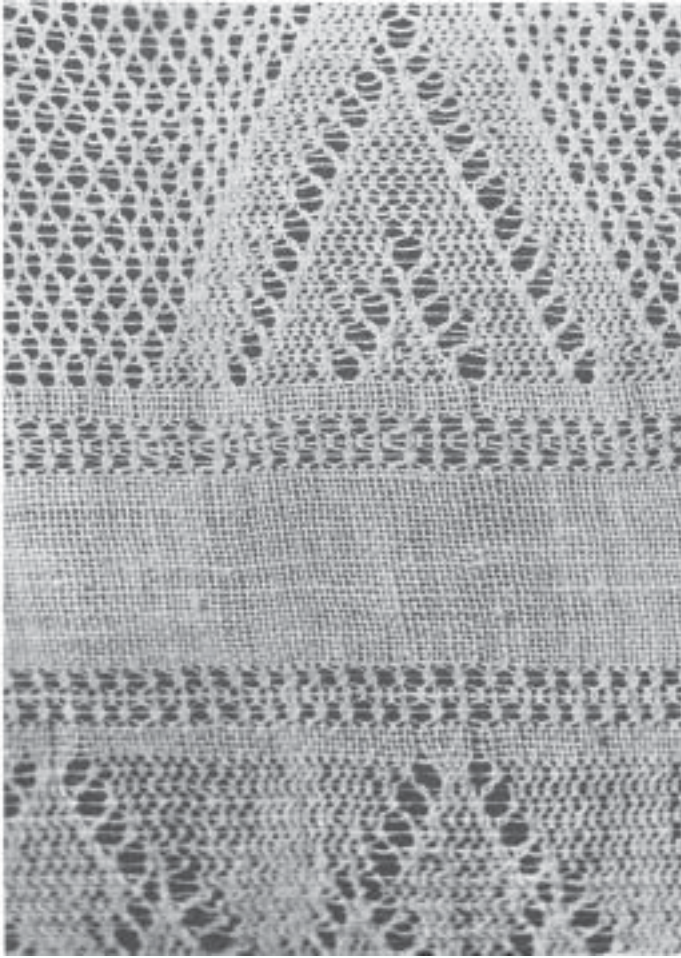
Mexican Lace Weaving

BY HELEN LOUISE ALLEN

WHILE in the southwest of Mexico one summer, I found some interesting examples of lace weaving done by the Tarascan Indians in the little village of Aranza in the mountains of Michoacan. This form of handling the warp threads is derived from the old Peruvian lace techniques. However, the Tarascan Indians have developed more elaborate uses of the old "stitches" than had the Peruvians. The looms the Indians use are the simple waist looms that are used by many primitive peoples when making narrow articles or belts. String leases form one shed, and the shed stick the other. The warp stick at one end of the warp is fastened to a tree in the garden or to a nail in the beam of the house if used indoors. The cloth beam is fastened to the weaver's waist by a broad leather or hemp belt. The weaver keeps the tension with her body. I sat and watched a woman weave, trying to memorize every motion that she was making and trying to see what her flying fingers did with the warp. We could not stay very long at the village and, as my Spanish was too weak to ask very many questions, I did not find out how they made the lace. Back in town I took the pieces I had bought around to the shops to see if anyone there could

do this type of weaving and could show me how. I finally found a woman who knew how, but she did not have her loom set up. She was willing to teach me, and it would probably take about two weeks.

As that amount of time was entirely out of the question, I brought my lace and my recollections of the weaver back to the United States with me and set about teaching myself. With a magnifying glass and some No. 1 thread, I started. At first I used a waist loom as the Indians had. I soon found that a small two-heddled loom worked better, mainly because Wisconsin winters are too cold to tie one's loom to a tree in the garden, and hardwood finishes are not conducive to driving nails for using the loom in the house, and someone is always wanting to open the door one has the loom tied to. It is very hard to be primitive in a civilized house. I spent every evening for two weeks twisting and untwisting and trying to reconcile what I had seen the Indian women doing with what I seemed to be doing, and having very little to show for my evenings' work but an improved vocabulary. Finally one evening, everything fell into place. I realized what the Indian women had been doing and saw how much



extra work I had been making myself. After that it was plain sailing and I changed to a finer thread.

There are two stitches in lace weaving, the single stitch which is used mainly for pattern, and the double stitch which is usually used for the background, as it moves along more rapidly than the single stitch. It is possible to use plain weave in conjunction with the double stitch, either one acting as background for the other, with equally interesting effects. Single stitch and plain weave do not combine well together, as the difference in appearance is not contrasting enough to make a pleasing effect. Single stitch is better used to contrast with double stitch either being used as pattern or as background.

The twist of the single stitch of the Mexican lace is different from that of the gauze weave. In regular gauze weave two warp threads are twisted on each other. (Illustration I.) In lace weave the thread is twisted with a warp thread two threads away. In either of the stitches the main thing to remember is always to have the same shed down before starting to pick up the threads. It does not matter which shed is used for picking up the threads providing the same shed is used down each time. For convenience sake I shall call this the "A" shed and all the threads in it "A" threads. The opposite threads, or the ones that are up when one is beginning to pick up, are the "B" threads. If one is right-handed it is better to have the weft thread out at the right side of the loom when one begins the lace stitch and to start picking up from the right to the left. A blunt-pointed stick an inch wide and a little longer than the width of the warp on the loom is the best to do the picking up with. This stick is also used as a

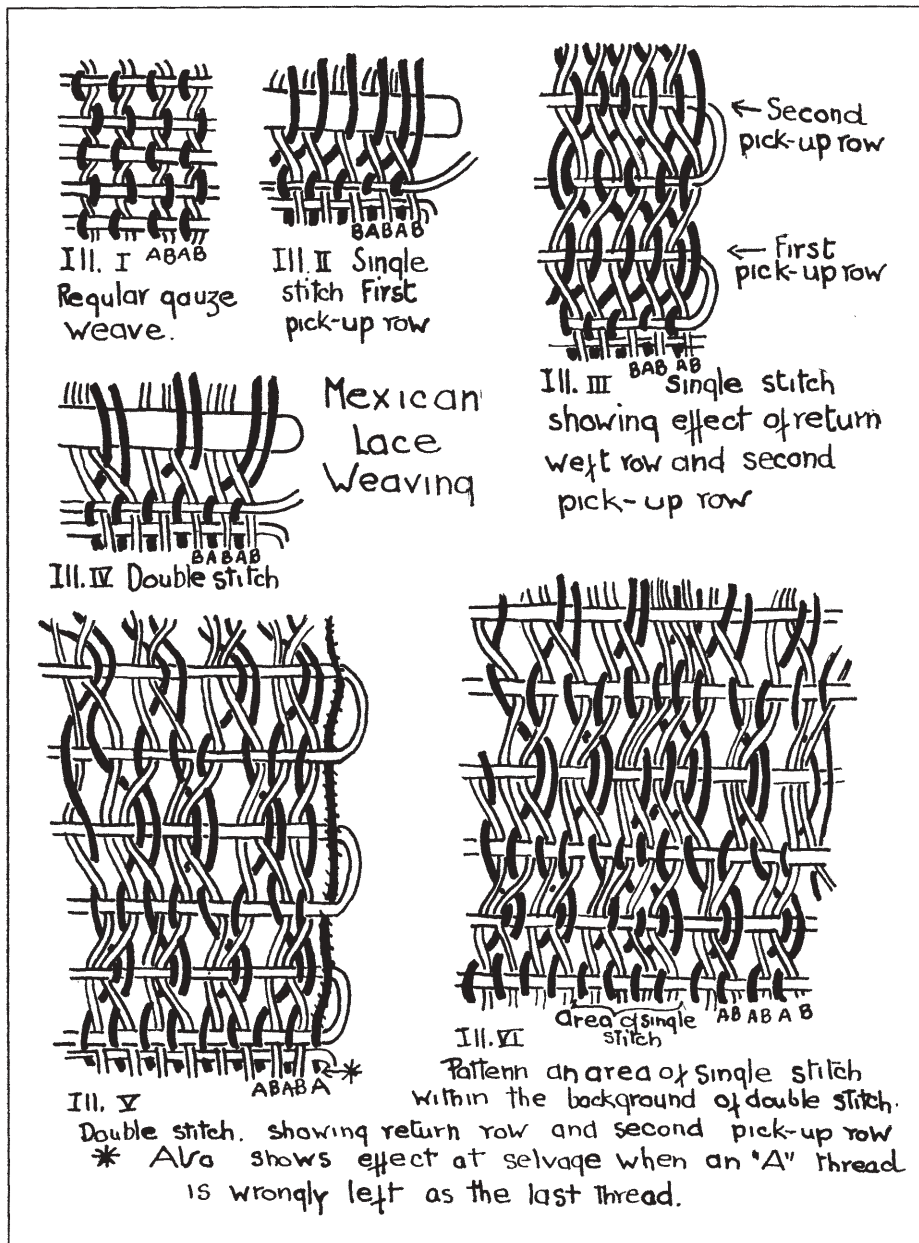
shed stick for opening the shed for the shuttle. It can be used as a beater or weaving sword for beating the weft up tighter.

In the following directions the last thread on the loom in the selvage at the right side is a "B" thread. That is, it is a thread that will be up when the twisting begins. What happens when an "A" thread is the last thread is shown in Illustration V.

A two-heddled loom may be used for doing the lace weave, or any loom that will weave plain weave. A four-harness loom may be set up in a plain twill. It is best to start with a coarse thread when learning the two stitches. After one has mastered the stitches a fine thread is no trouble at all. In the beginning it might even be well to have all the "A" threads one color and the "B" threads another.

Single Stitch (Illustrations II and III)

Put the "A" shed down. Pick up two "A" threads on the point of the stick, pull them slightly to the right and up. Press down a "B" thread in the opening. Pull up the next "A" thread and press down the next "B" thread. Each "A" thread should pass under two "B" threads before coming up. (Except the first "A" thread at the right, as can be seen in Illustration II.) When all the threads are picked up, turn the pick-up stick on edge and pass the shuttle through the shed. Change sheds and beat. Then pass the shuttle back through this shed. Change sheds and beat firmly. The threads are now in position to be picked up again. In either of the stitches the "A" threads always lie on top of weft thread.



Making the Pattern (Illustration VI)

The double stitch is the one usually used for the background. When one desires a pattern, bring two threads up but put only one down. Then "one up and one down," or single stitch, for the length that one wishes the design. When concluding the design area of single stitch, bring one thread up and put two down. The pattern should always be ended so that the alternation of the background groups will be correct.

On account of the alternation of the background it is necessary that the designs be based on diagonal and horizontal lines rather than the use of vertical lines. However, this is a limitation that is not hard to work under, as there are plenty of possibilities of designs, geometric, animal, and floral that are based on horizontal and diagonal line, or can be altered to do so.

There is one drawback to the true Tarascan lace weaving that I have been trying to overcome. If one uses bands of lace weave with bands of plain weave, the edge is always scalloped, as the lace draws in and the plain weave stays out the full width of the article in the beater. There are three ways to overcome this. One way is to plan not to have any plain weave bands but to have the article all lace weave, finishing the article by fringing the warp ends. Another way is not to use the reed as a beater, but only as a spacer, and to use the stick as a weaving sword and to draw in the weft in the plain weave areas to correspond to the same width as the lace weave bands.

The third and most successful way of handling this drawing-in is to incorporate plain weave areas into the

Double Stitch (Illustrations IV and V)

Push shed into position for picking up. Pull up and to the right two "A" threads and push down two "B" threads. Then two "A" threads are pulled up in this space and two "B" threads are pushed down. Repeat across the article. Put in the weft. Change sheds beat, and bring the shuttle back. Change to pick-up position and beat. For the second pick-up row, pick up one "A" thread and push down one "B" thread, then two "A" and two "B's" as before, in row one. Put in weft. Change sheds and beat. Bring back weft. Change shed and beat. For the third row, pick up as for the first row, and for the fourth pick-up row, pick up as for the second pick-up row. Every other pick-up row brings the same set of four threads together.

design, letting them come at the selvage edge of the article. In doing this it is necessary to have three rows of plain weave to one row of lace, as the plain weave beats down much more firmly than the lace weave. Pass the weft shuttle across the area of plain weave, then change sheds and pass it back to the beginning of the area, change to the first shed and bring it back again before going on with the lace pattern. A little practice in knowing how loose to make the tension of the weft will give an even plain weave. Areas of plain weave also make very effective contrasts with the two lace stitches.

The finer the thread one works with, the lacier the product. Fine, tightly twisted cotton is the best thread, but fine Fabri wool would make effective scarves.