

IRISH LACE.

THE lace industry of Ireland is the successor to no ancient school, nor can Erin boast of any laces of her own invention. Indeed, this people, so fertile in decorative invention and so skilful with their fingers, seem throughout all time to have cared less for embroideries and needlework than any other nation in Europe. The love of bright colour, the high taste and marvellous handiwork that inspired and produced the goldsmiths' and illuminated work of the ancient Irish, do not appear to have been exercised on the work of the needle, and since the Norman invasion the poverty and unsettled condition of Ireland have closed the market to all such expensive superfluities as embroidery or lace.

Yet poverty is the mother of the Irish lace industry, and its history is, broadly speaking, the history of Irish famine; for Irish lace existed, and still exists, not to supply the commercial demand for it, but to enable a poverty-stricken population to earn a meal of porridge or potatoes.

We first hear of the Irish lace trade towards the middle of the last century, when the Dublin Society organized lectures for the instruction of lace-workers, and granted prizes to the annual value of thirty pounds for the best-made Irish lace. There was, indeed, sore need for some such industry; the exemption of pasture-lands from tithe, and the raising of the embargo on the importation of Irish cattle into England, had occasioned a perfect grazing fever, and as a consequence thousands of small tenants were evicted in order that their lands might be laid down in grass. The restrictions on exports had utterly ruined Irish trade, and thus there was no business for these evicted farmers and cast-off agricultural labourers to turn to, when the Dublin Society resolved to establish an industry by which the women of Ireland might earn a living as good as that which the women of Venice, Flanders, and Valenciennes secured for themselves. But the buyers of fine laces,—the courtiers of France, the merchant princes of Venice and Flanders,—had no existence in Ireland, where each new-born trade was strangled by the timorous jealousy of England, and where the large majority of the people were, by the laws affecting their religion, debarred from entering the professions or from holding any place at court. Under these conditions the majority of the Irish gentry could barely maintain their position, and not one in a hundred could spare money to buy rich laces, so that the industry failed for want of a market, and for long we hear no more of Irish lace.

The end of the second decade of this century was, however, a period of exceptional distress in Ireland, and again we see this handmaiden of luxury striving to stand between famine and the people. The farmers of both England and Ireland had suffered keenly from the low prices which succeeded to the peace of 1815, and four years later the failure of the potato crop deprived millions of people in Ireland of their only food, they having no money to buy the wheat harvest which was shipped over to England to pay the rents.

Throughout the country the benevolent strove to find means to lessen the distress, and at Ahan, near Carrickmacross, two ladies named Reid, having heard by chance of the success

with which a neighbour had taught her maidservant to make Brussels appliqué, first set themselves to acquire the art, and then taught it to their neighbours. Thus quietly and unostentatiously was founded the Carrickmacross lace school, which has weathered every change of fashion, and which has now many imitators throughout the country. The next attempt to establish lace-making in Ireland was the one commercial venture connected with the history of this industry. A certain Mr. Walker, of Oxford, whether inspired by hearing of the readiness with which the Carrickmacross peasantry had learned the neat art of appliqué-making, or tempted by the cheapness of labour in Ireland, resolved to found a lace manufactory at Limerick, and for that purpose brought over twenty-four guipure and appliqué-makers from England. The work was soon learned by the quick-witted Connaught girls, and in a short time Limerick appliqué excelled that of Carrickmacross, though it, like all later appliqué laces in Ireland, took the name of the original manufacture. But these hand-made laces were necessarily costly, and in those days when machine-made laces were developed only to an extent which fitted them for window curtains and like purposes, there existed a great demand for cheap laces, and to meet this two varieties of hand embroidery on machine-made net were practised at Limerick and attained popularity under the names of "run" and "tambour" Limerick lace. The growth of machine laces has ruined the trade in these nets, for, owing to the nature of their foundations, they are little more durable than machine laces, and they are inevitably more expensive; still the charming lightness and prettiness of the "run" lace ought to have enabled it to hold its own if it had been worked from good designs. Like all lace and embroidery, run net depends for its beauty mainly on its design, and, unhappily, design has always been the weak point of Irish laces, and to this cause, quite as much as to their coarseness and the imperfections of their execution, must be attributed the ruin which threatens or has overwhelmed the various centres. Poor Limerick, standing half-way between real lace and imitation, fell to the ground, and it is unlikely that it will ever have a resurrection, for the wages earned by it are hardly likely to tempt the girls of a city, and it is to the country districts that we must look for the future of Irish lace.

By far the greatest number of lace centres came into existence during the famine years of '46, '47, an evil hour for decorative art, when deft-fingered ladies who now produce soft-coloured Persian embroidery or brilliant harmonies adapted from the book of Kells, devoted themselves to the multiplication of hideous designs in crochet and inanities in tatting. That was the fashion of the hour; and remembering these things we can only wonder, not at the many bad things that were produced in these Irish lace schools, but at the bright exceptions that prove how closely the modern laces of Ireland might vie with the best productions of Italy and Spain. Some districts both in north and south have wrought some really fine copies of the heavier antique points; and first among the northern schools we must place Innishmacsaint, in county Fermanagh. In this desolate "isle of the sorrel

plain," Venetian and Spanish laces are so exactly imitated that they have frequently been sold as old point, and it is difficult to realise that this delicate work was taught by amateur lace-makers, and learned by a peasantry who had probably never seen a piece of lace till they began to try to copy it. Yet lace-making was never attempted in this district before the years of the great famine, when the wife and sister of the rector being, by a happy chance, skilled lace-makers, set themselves to impart this art to their starving neighbours. The district of Clones, in Monaghan, was scarcely less fortunate, for though the rector's wife there did not know point stitches, she instructed her people to make a crochet lace very little inferior to the old Dutch crochets, which are often bought and worn in the belief that they are Italian points. The best Clones laces, whether copied from Dutch crochet or Greek lace, are of almost equal value with the originals, and they were at one time in vogue among continental and American leaders of fashion, attaining, by their merits, a good market and commercial success. But the temptation to work cheap, and the floods of bad Irish crochets which inundated the market, ruined the name of this budding industry, the small amount of good being involved in the ruin caused by the plethora of inferior work. But the tide is now on the turn, and crochet has now the brightest prospects of any Irish lace, the new silk crochets invented by Messrs. Hayward, of Oxford Street, and finely executed from good designs, having caused a reaction in favour of this comparatively low-priced lace.

The best work of the needle must always be superior to the best work of the crochet hook, which does not lend itself to the infinite and delicate gradations of stitch, relief, and texture, that bear so large a part in the beauty of needle point. But the effect of fine crochet is so nearly equal to that of point of the second order that the difference of cost will probably turn the balance of fashion in its favour. The northern lace schools, depending chiefly for their organization on the ability and zeal of one person, are apt to degenerate and flag when death or circumstance removes that inspiring spirit, and it is probably for this reason that we find such a much larger number of lace-makers in the southern provinces, where the schools are all under the direction of convents. Here, as in the north, the lace trade owes its existence to philanthropy, and dates mainly from the great famine year, the founder of the southern point laces having been a nun of the Presentation Order at Youghal. While the Fermanagh rector's wife was teaching point stitches to the women of her husband's flock, this Munster nun was instructing a chosen band of girls and nuns in the mysteries of point lace-making which she herself had recently unravelled from a small piece of old Venetian point. She was a woman of rare intelligence, choosing her pupils with a quick instinctive knowledge of the character that would make not only the readiest pupil but the best teacher. She had too a lively fancy and bright ingenuity in design, each stitch and pattern suggesting to her some new effect or combination, so that the work of her school was stamped with an originality and character that secured a certain market and gained it the title "Irish point." Her success led to the foundation of many lace schools, and lace teaching convents are now thickly scattered throughout Munster, the manufacture embracing not only Irish, Venetian, Spanish, rose and tape needle laces, but all those varieties of Carrickmacross appliqué, Limerick embroidered net, drawn linen and crochet which are known as Irish lace.

Crochet is probably the most extensively made of these varieties, much of it being the work of children in the national schools, and so poor in design and rude in make that it has no right to consideration either as art or lace. Happily the persons most concerned in the welfare of the lace trade are at last awakened to the ruin that must follow this deterioration, and the nuns have eagerly responded to the offers of help made by the Art Department at South Kensington. We have become so accustomed to find all materials for embroidery ready to our hands that we hardly realise how impossible it was to procure good designs and soft bright-coloured wools and silks before the South Kensington authorities took the matter in hand; but we have only to compare the fancy work of the average Englishwoman of to-day with that of the previous generation, to see how vast is the improvement in the materials at our choice and in the Art culture of the workers. And what South Kensington has done for English embroidery it is now striving to do for Irish lace, by encouraging design, by offering prizes, and by establishing branch schools for special instruction in elementary drawing and lace designing. This work was begun in 1884, when Mr. Alan Cole first visited Ireland in the interest of the lace-makers, and since that time he has made an annual tour in the south, delivering lectures, visiting convents, and inspecting the lace, designs, and drawings that have been made under the direction of the Art Schools of Cork and Waterford. More than ten convents have now connected themselves with these centres, thus obtaining all the advantages accruing from Government grants of money, and of examples, such as specimens and photographs of fine old laces, books on Art, and the like. It is encouraging to find that though the majority of the competition prizes have been gained by a professional designer, Mr. Michael Hayes, a certain number have fallen to members of the various communities in which the younger nuns are working hard for the Art teacher's certificate. Before Irish lace can rank with the modern laces of Brussels or Burano, much remains to be done both in the matter of design and execution; but it has made an onward step, and what is now most needed is generous but discriminating patronage. The Queen, who last year ordered Irish laces to the value of £45, has now given a commission of £60 for laces to be executed from the new designs, but the success of the new silk crochets of Messrs. Hayward speaks better for the future of the lace trade than any amount of philanthropic aid. Yet there are instances of thriving trades founded on purely philanthropic motives; the Donegal wool industry promoted by Mrs. Ernest Hart bids fair to rank among these, and the Burano lace trade stands already on a firm commercial basis. Yet three-and-twenty years ago, when Countess Marcella resolved to revive this industry, there existed no demand for Burano lace, and only one woman in the island understood point lace-making. Moreover, Burano had never been an historic lace—merely a Venetian effort to reproduce the airy Brussels points when these superseded the heavier Italian laces in the eighteenth century. The modern Burano was handicapped also by the impossibility of finding Italian thread even and fine enough to reproduce the cobwebby Brussels foundation, yet by the nobility of its designs and the neat perfection of its stitches it won for itself success years before suitable thread could be procured. Since then the manufacture has steadily advanced, and the Burano school now produces not only the old Burano patterns, but the best points of Brussels, France, and

Venice, and these laces, exact reproductions of their famous forerunners, find a ready market. The supply has created a demand, and more than three hundred women of that tiny Adriatic island now find regular employment in the lace school. Their work, most strictly supervised, always reaches the same high standard, and it may safely be said that nothing ugly, vulgar, or even commonplace has ever come out of the Burano school, which has bravely resisted all temptations to work cheap. As a result of this wise foresight Burano keeps its market, and the best workers, instead of earning the few pence that are the wages of inferior lace-makers, can make three or four francs daily, the more ordinary hands

earning one franc a day. Cheap laces in these days of pretty machine-made trimmings can never pay. Coarse crochets, when made, like one I saw at South Kensington a few days since, from good "rococo" design, will probably find a market as the best finish to washing dresses; but to secure this they must be low-priced, and are utterly at the mercy of fashion. Good laces, on the other hand, will be worn as long as women care to be well dressed, and for this reason we would advise lace patrons to encourage most those finer laces which can be developed till they reach the sumptuous perfection of the old points of Italy.

MABEL F. ROBINSON.