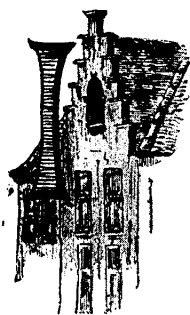


A LACE SCHOOL AT BRUGES.



It was "In the ancient town of Bruges" that we looked out of our window, so soon as the bell of St. Jacques hard by told us that morning had come and good folks were going to early mass.

The great brick church towered up beside our comfortable inn. The newly-risen sun blazed on a red-tiled roof. Two women, wrapped in long black cloth cloaks that fell about them in rich folds, stood talking under a deep archway opposite. This archway, which we very soon determined to explore, in hopes that some golden fleece would reward our search, led into a kind of passage between and beneath houses new and old. Then it widened into an irregular little court with an ancient rounded *tourelle* half buried in more modern buildings, while over the roofs to the right rose a beautiful round tower, tall and slender, of old brick, red, yellow, and grey, with deep machicolated stone work at the top, the whole crowned by an extinguisher-shaped roof of richly coloured tiles running up into a sharp black point against the blue sky. Before us was another archway. Passing through this we found ourselves in the silent Rue des Aiguilles; and turning to the left, under high yellow-washed houses with rows of tall windows and mellow, warmly-coloured roofs, we came upon a great green door. A little *grille* in it told us it must be a convent, and we then remembered certain urgent injunctions from an English friend, "Whatever you see, or do not see, be sure you go to the lace-making school in the Rue des Aiguilles."

We pulled the long iron bell-handle, and presently the *grille* opened, a pretty white-coifed face looked through the bars, then drew back, and the door opened wide. There stood a gentle sister in black dress with wide sleeves, her placid face looking out from the depths of a snowy cap—a remarkably becoming one, by the way—which joined her deep white collar or kerchief. Our errand was soon told, and we were instantly admitted. The great gate swung to behind us, and we found ourselves in a wide silent courtyard, with high buildings on three sides, a high wall on the fourth, and in a corner near to the entrance a very graceful little tower with a deeply carved balustrade, above which rose a crocketed *flèche*.

We were nearer Colchis than we thought for. This house was built about 1470, by Pierre Bladelin, chamberlain to Charles the Bold, and treasurer of that world-famed order of the Golden Fleece which Charles's father, Philip the Good, instituted at Bruges in 1430, on the occasion of his marriage with Isabella of Portugal. Later on, the house—one of the most important in Bruges—was inhabited by Thomas Portunari, the agent of the Medici, then by Messire Jacques Fiennes de Luxembourg, and eventually it became the property of the luckless Count Egmont. In one vast empty room the coats of arms of Burgundy and of all the great families of Flanders, together with the three golden balls of the Medici, are still to be seen elaborately carved upon the heavy beams of the ceiling. It was one of the halls of that splendid house, where gorgeous decoration, velvets and silks and hangings

stiff with gold, served as a setting to the jewels and plate, to the magnificent dresses, to the unbounded extravagance, luxury, and license of the Burgundian Court. Now it is put to a different use. When her last hour is approaching each nun is carried into the great bare room—to die.

The little sister, who spoke but indifferent French, led us up-stairs to the parlour, and thence down a long, cold, spotlessly clean passage, where we became painfully aware of the sound of our own footsteps. It was all absolutely still—silent as the grave. Was this gentle woman the only living being here? Was the great house some enchanted abode where peace and silence reign for ever, and no breath from the outer world can come? Was it expiating by this unbroken quiet the fierce revelry it had witnessed under Counts of Flanders, Dukes of Burgundy, and Knights of the Golden Fleece? We were wandering on as in a dream, when our guide opened a door into a large, well-lighted room, with tall fifteenth-century windows. We heard a subdued hum of many voices, mingled with a soft, dry little rattle of smooth wood; and in a moment our dream had fled. We were no longer in Pierre Bladelin's splendid house of the fifteenth century, but back in the busy, striving world of to-day.

The room was full of young women and children sitting in rows of three. Each had a little stand before her, and on it a sloping cushion with hundreds of pins and scores of wooden bobbins; while down the centre of it where the pins were thickest, covered by a strip of blue paper and the paper again covered by a strip of calico, lay the precious filmy lace growing under the flying fingers. Our entrance, though it created evident surprise and interest among the sixty workers and the three white-coifed sisters who sat in charge of them, caused no cessation in the work—no, not for a second. The bobbins clattered, the pins were pricked into the holes on the patterns, the delicate fingers—fine and taper as those of any great lady—worked on ceaselessly, as we moved up between the lines of *dentellières* to meet a pleasant sister, who welcomed us with charming courtesy in perfect French.

The lace-makers were of all ages from seven years old and upwards. They may not come younger than seven; and that, poor mites, seems early enough to begin to earn their bread. But they may stay as long as they like. Some remain after they are grown women. One particularly clever worker had been in the school for twenty-six years; and sat at her work overlooking a niece on each side of her. They were all poorly but neatly dressed, and extremely clean.

"We do not mind how poor they are," said the good sister Marie-Alphonse. "But they must be clean. If any one comes who does not heed our rule, Go home, we say, till you have learnt to be cleanly. Then you may return to us."

The convent of the Sœurs Pauline was founded in 1816 by M. l'Abbé de Foere, a holy and devoted man, very wealthy, and entirely given to good works. He was imprisoned for two years towards the end of the first French Empire. "It was during that time that he composed our holy rule—*notre sainte règle*—'Obedience, prayer, and work.'" And when one sees these children under the kindly and elevating influ-

ence of the excellent sisters, one does not regret the Abbé de Foere's two years in prison. For these *dentellières* are taken from the very poorest and lowest families. And day after day, from seven in the morning till half-past seven at night, they are kept warm, safe, and happy—teaching, warmth, and light being given absolutely gratis.

"The children often come without having had a morsel of food," said sister Marie-Alphonse. "That little girl has a wicked father who half starves her. This morning she came with a little bit of black bread, all her food for the day."

"What did you do?" we inquired, thinking that twelve hours' lace-making on a scrap of black bread was rather hard measure for a child of ten.

"We are not supposed to feed them," was the answer. "But could we let them hunger? No! no! we always have plenty of good soup ready." And the sister's eyes twinkled as she arranged one of the pillows to get a better light upon it.

Till 11 A.M., one sister takes classes of the younger children



The Lace School in the Rue des Aiguilles, Bruges.

by turns in a schoolroom, to teach them reading, writing, and the first four rules of arithmetic. We asked if French was taught, but were told, "No, it would take too much time; and after all it would not do much good, as every one in Bruges speaks Flemish." At the end of the year, prizes are given for *vaiillance*, beauty of work, etc. These are always in the form of useful clothing, with a franc or half a franc, or a medal, in addition. Shoes—the terrible item of clothing in over-civilised communities—need not be thought of here. The ranks of wooden sabots outside the door make one think of the entrance to a mosque; while the little owners trot noiselessly about in their thick home-knit stockings without fear of catching cold; for the room is kept so hot in winter, to make up for the insufficient food of the workers, that the poor nuns nearly suffocate.

This lace school is not by any means the only one in Bruges; and in Belgium there are over 900 in all. The total number of lace-makers at home and in the schools is over 150,000. The lace schools owe their existence mainly to

Charles V., who commanded that lace-making should be taught in the schools and convents of Flanders. But the old régime has changed considerably in these establishments; and the kindly rule in the Rue des Aiguilles forms a curious contrast to an entertaining description of a Flemish lace school in 1677, by one Andrew Yarranton, Gent., for which I am indebted to Mrs. Bury Palliser's admirable "History of Lace."

"Joining to this spinning school is one for maids weaving bone lace; and in all towns there are schools according to the bigness and multitude of the children. I will show you how they are governed. First, there is a large room, and in the middle thereof a little box like a pulpit. Second, there are benches built about the room as they are in our play-houses. And in the box in the middle of the room, the grand mistress, with a long white wand in her hand. If she observes any of them idle, she reaches them a tap, and if that will not do, she rings a bell, which, by a little cord, is attached to the box. She points out the offender, and she is taken into another room and chastised. And I believe this way of ordering the young women in Germany (Flanders) is one great cause that the German women have so little *twit twat* (chatter, gossip), and I am sure it will be as well were it so in England."*

Guipure, both white and black, Duchesse, Brussels, Torchon, and a kind of black Maltese lace, are all made in M. de Foere's school. These are all pillow laces; for little point—*i.e.* needle-made lace—is now manufactured outside Brussels. But the chief industry of the school is Valenciennes lace, from the simple narrow edging, on which the little seven-year-old girls begin to learn, to the deep lace six or eight inches wide, worth 50 francs the aune.

The thread comes entirely from Nottingham, as no sufficiently fine machine-made thread can be found in Belgium; while the cost of the fine hand-made thread used for Brussels lace is so enormous as to make it useless for any but the finest laces. It is spun in dark underground rooms, from flax grown at Hal and Rebecq-Rognon; and has been known to fetch the astounding price of £500 per lb. The thread and the patterns are supplied by the lace manufacturers, for whom all the work is done; and the *dentellières* are not allowed to sell an inch of it themselves. They are paid by the piece, and a miserable pittance they earn. A very *vaiillante* worker, by working from 7 A.M. to 7.30 P.M., can earn 1 franc 25 centimes a day: but this is not often done. The greater number gain 40 to 80 centimes a day. The sister showed us the best worker in the school, a gentle, bright-looking girl of twenty-five, with beautiful hands—as indeed they all have—and stooping, contracted figure—as, alas! they all have also. She was making a magnificent piece of Valenciennes about seven inches wide, deeply scalloped, with a large spray of closely worked flowers in each scallop. We asked how much she could do in the week, and she answered "one pattern," about seven or eight inches, that is to say, barely a yard in a month.

The sister in charge of one of the classes, who sat, not in a "box," but on a little raised platform, was making a grand piece of guipure with strong linen thread. But she told us she could not work long at it, as it required so much strength. "It is pulling, pulling, all the time, and it makes one's hands ache."

Lace-making has been one of the chief industries of

* "England's Improvement by Sea and Land, to outdo the Dutch without fighting." Andrew Yarranton, Gent., London, 1677.

Flanders from very early times. Indeed it has been a subject of hot controversy, whether the manufacture of thread-lace was invented in Belgium or in Italy.

Baron Reiffenberg asserts that lace cornettes or caps were worn in Flanders as early as the fourteenth century. In Quentin Matsys' famous altar-piece from the Church of St. Pierre at Louvain, 1495, now in the Musée Royale at Brussels, a girl is seen making lace on a pillow with a drawer, just like those now in use. And in a series of engravings after Martin de Vos, 1581, representing the national occupations of the seven ages, a woman is seated at an embroidery frame, with a young girl beside her making lace on a cushion, pricking in her pins and dividing the threads of her round bobbins with exactly the same turn of the hand one sees among the Belgian *dentellières* of to-day.

In the Musée de Cluny a cap is still preserved which Charles V. wore under his crown. It is made of fine white linen, and is embroidered with the imperial arms in relief, and ornamented with Lacis of exquisite workmanship. This Lacis is one of the earliest forms of lace; and consists of a fine darned pattern of counted stitches on a *réseau*, or groundwork of square net-work meshes. Mary of Hungary, sister of Charles V., and governess of the Low Countries, in a picture at Versailles wears cuffs of the geometric-patterned "Dantelle," which was then in vogue. And both the cap and cuffs are evidently of Flemish manufacture. For in the sixteenth century Flanders was

already famous for her lace. All the nations of Northern Europe learned the art of lace-making from her. And this industry, the only one which held up its head against the religious persecutions of the age, did more than anything else to save the commercial prosperity of the country from utter ruin.

England after the Restoration was the best market for the choicest Brussels point, which thereby gained the misnomer of Point d'Angleterre—a name it still keeps. While Colbert was so alarmed at the fortunes spent in France on Flanders and Venice points, that he established the *fabrique* of the

matchless Point d'Alençon at his château of Lonray, and by the ordinance of 1665 prohibited the importation of foreign points. England had already taken a like precaution in 1662, in the hope of encouraging her home manufacture of lace: but with little success. For smuggling was carried on to such an extent, that on one vessel bound for England and captured by the Marquis de Nesmond, 744,953 ells of Brussels point were found, besides handkerchiefs, fichus, collars, etc.

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries all the laces of Flanders, with the exception of Brussels and "point double,"

were known as Mechlin or Malines. Bruges, Ypres, Courtrai, and Dunkirk were centres of the manufacture, as well as the curious old city which gives its name to this lovely fabric. The true point de Malines, to which Napoleon compared the delicate tracery of the spire of Antwerp Cathedral, was made at Malines, and was much prized in England. After the repeal of the statute of Charles II. in 1699, no belle or beau considered their apparel complete without their "Macklin."

For the last hundred and fifty years, however, Bruges, in common with all the towns of West Flanders, has been given over to the making of Valenciennes lace. The manufacture in and round Valenciennes was crushed by the French Revolution; and although Napoleon did all he could in the first years of the century to revive the industry, it died out so completely that in 1851 only two lace-workers, eighty years old, were to be found in the city. As

early as 1684 Ypres began to make what was known in the last century as "fausses Valenciennes," to distinguish the Belgian from the true French lace. The old Valenciennes laces of Ypres "are of the finest quality and most elaborate in their workmanship," says Mrs. Bury Palliser. "On a piece not two inches wide from two hundred to three hundred bobbins are employed, and for the larger widths as many as eight hundred or more are used on the same pillow."

The Bruges lace has never enjoyed a very high commercial reputation. Each different town has its peculiar way of making the *réseau* or ground. At Bruges the bobbins are



A Bruges Lace-Maker.

only twisted twice; at Ghent two and a half turns are given; at Courtrai, three; at Ypres and Alost, four and five. But nevertheless some of the finest modern lace at Bruges is very beautiful; while in the curiosity shops, and in the rag market which is held on the Dyver every Wednesday and Saturday,



In the Rue des Aiguilles, Bruges.

one may chance to come across a scrap of old Valenciennes of exquisite quality, the rich thick pattern almost like cambric in texture on a fine clear ground. Or if one is really in luck's way, one may pick up for a song a morsel of old Bruges point, which perchance trimmed the jabot or sleeves of some gallant soldier when Marlborough took the city in 1708, or when Louis XV. entered it in triumph nearly forty years later.

By half-past six in the evening we were once more

knocking at the convent gate. For we were fascinated by the busy scene, the kindly nuns, the happy-faced workers, and had asked permission to come again and see the school by lamplight, which was readily granted us.

When we entered the workroom we were astonished to find only a dull, subdued light in it—hardly enough to read by—and for a moment were puzzled to imagine how such fine work could be carried on by it. But we then saw that the girls sat in rows of two, three, or four, radiating from small tables. In the centre of each table a bright single-burner paraffin lamp was sunk, round which stood five large globular bottles of clear glass filled with water; through the centre of each of these globes a strong narrow ray of light was concentrated on the cushions of the five rows of *dentellières*, who formed the arms of a star with their lamp for its nucleus. By this simple invention the light is thrown upon the work without injuring the eyes of the workers—an inestimable boon to them, for in the last century it was said that the best lace-workers were blind by thirty.

We wandered up the centre of the room, and then our kindly guide asked if we would like to hear the girls sing. She had told them the ladies would return in the evening, so they were all prepared. Of course we assented, outwardly

with pleasure, inwardly with fear and trembling, for we were filled with dread as to what Flemish voices might be. The sister said a word to a quiet maiden beside her; and immediately, without moving her eyes from her cushion, she began in Flemish, with a clear sweet soprano voice, that exquisitely pathetic hymn to the Virgin, "C'est elle qui nous console," which one hears sung by the Enfants de Marie all over France and Italy. One after another took it up all through the room in four parts—a glorious contralto—and even a sort of bass in a distant corner.

As the hymn rose and fell in full rich tones, perfectly modulated, to an accompaniment of the ceaseless click of the bobbins with the nimble fingers flying among them, it carried us far away. We saw a narrow street of tall houses on the night of Good Friday—flashing torches, flickering tapers, white-robed priests, the awful brothers of the Misericordia, black-veiled women, flower-crowned children, kneeling crowds on the pavement, lamps in every window, while the same hymn rose and fell, and the wind sougled through the umbrella pines on the Apennines above, and rattled the palm branches in the garden, and the waves of the Mediterranean lapped for ever on the grey beach.

"Cela ne vous ennuie pas, mesdames?" whispered the good sister, quite disturbed at the silence that had fallen upon us. "Now we will have something gay," she went on. "They shall sing you a song of their *métier*. See how their faces brighten. They will all begin to laugh. They are for ever laughing, these children. We sometimes find it hard to keep them in order. Ah! but it takes patience to teach them. Yet what is that, if we can save them from the degradation of their wretched homes? Now they begin. They are saying they must be *vaillante*, the faster the fingers go the more money they will gain. See how they laugh at the refrain of the bobbins. 'Tic-à-tac—another franc in my pocket.'"

"Bootjes, Bootjes rolt maar voort,
Springt maar voort in danst, in volle accord.
Kinders laat u in slaap niet wiegen.
Tikke, tikke, tikke tak—
Nog een franksken in mijn zak."

I know not how long we stood listening to the songs and the running accompaniment of pleasant chat from the placid nun, her soft white hands folded under her wide sleeves, gently rubbing her arms after the fashion of *religieuses*. Presently a door opened. A lovely sister, with great violet eyes and long curling lashes, came to say supper was ready. Our time was up. But first, Sister Marie-Alphonse will show us the way out. "Quick, Marie," she cries to a little girl, "the lantern and the key." Both are brought—antiquated in the extreme. We stumble down the dim stairs, out into the cold air of the courtyard, across to the heavy outer gates. The good nun leans out over the step to give us hearty "bon voyage," and begs us to come again. One more glimpse of the white cap, the smiling face, the flickering lantern—the ponderous door of Pierre Bladelin's house closes. And, as we grope our way across the dark street, we hardly know which are more real—the gentle nuns, the happy children, the filmy lace; or the gorgeous memories of the Burgundian reign, of Knights of the Golden Fleece, with which they are jumbled in picturesque confusion in our minds.

ROSE G. KINGSLEY.