

THE PERFUMES OF FRANCE

By LUCY H. HOOPER



THE French are renowned for their products in perfumery as well as for those in the lines of silks and wines. The names of Lubin, of Piver, and of Guerlain are famed throughout the habitable globe for their preparation of delicate odors in an infinite variety of forms. Yet they have never been able to create any perfume that will cope with two of the staple scents of commerce, the cologne water of Germany and the English lavender water.

Now, as perfumes form so large a feature in the commerce of France, and are produced in such large quantities, one would naturally imagine that they are manufactured wholesale in great establishments especially devoted to their preparation. Such is not the case. The delicate odors of scented flowers require for their capture and imprisonment a peculiar treatment. They must be extracted from the parent blossoms while the petals are still fresh, and to develop the properties of these flowers the heat of a southern sun is necessary.

These immense plantations exist in almost every department of the south of France, but the Riviera is especially devoted to this type of dainty agriculture. Grasse, Nice and Cannes and the neighboring villages provide the greater part of the perfumes of commerce. Each city has its special product. Nice supplies violets and orange blossoms, as does also Cannes, and the latter place is also famous for its roses and tuberose and jessamine. Grasse supplies large quantities of the three last-named flowers. The quantity of orange blossoms gathered annually on the Riviera amounts to the astonishing weight of one million and a quarter pounds. After that one learns without surprise that the violet crop of Nice is 50,000 pounds per annum.

Similar plantations to those of the Riviera exist in England for the cultivation of lavender and mint. The two principal points are at Hitchinx, in Hertford, and at Mitcham, in Surrey. Italy supplies orris root and bergamot, and Sicily, orange and lemon, those two fruits being largely employed in the preparation of perfumery. The yellow portion of the rind is grated very fine and is then subjected to great pressure, by which process the essential oil is forced out. The grated rind is enclosed in bags of haircloth before being submitted to the press. The liquid thus produced is mixed with the watery juices of the rind, but it is suffered to stand for a short time, and the oil then rises to the top and can easily be removed. Flowers are treated after a far more elaborate fashion, their scent being extracted either by distillation or by maceration, or by the process known as "enfleurage," which last is the favorite method employed by the famous perfumer Lubin. It consists in arranging the buds and the petals of freshly-gathered blossoms in shallow boxes, the bottoms of which are formed of glass and covered with a half inch layer of fresh animal fat. The method known as maceration is to smother the flowers in a mixture of lard and mutton or beef tallow. In both these forms of preparation the grease employed absorbs the scent of the flowers, one kind alone being used in each instance.

The flower-laden grease used in each of these forms of preparation is afterward subjected to immense pressure in presses specially prepared for the process, to force out every particle of the fat from the masses of blossoms. When it is found not to be sufficiently perfumed a fresh mass of flowers is added to it and the process is gone all over again. Another and more subtle method of extracting the odors is that proposed by M. Piver. This is to pass a stream of air through a vase filled with fresh flowers, and then through a second vessel containing liquid grease in which flat glass discs are kept constantly revolving by machinery. The oil, loaded with the scent of the flowers, deposits its burden of sweetness in the grease. The highly-scented pomades thus produced form the bases of the perfumery of commerce. They are packed in air-tight cans of tin with the covers soldered on, and in that state are transported to Paris. In the laboratories of the great perfumers they are treated with highly refined spirits of wine, and so are formed the dainty scents prepared to be sprinkled on a lady's handkerchief.

The most potent of all perfumes, musk and attar-of-roses, are imported from the East, but are too powerful, especially the former, for European tastes at the present day. It was, however, the favorite scent of that most elegant of royal ladies, the Empress Josephine. Down to the epoch of the destruction of the palace of St. Cloud by fire during the war of 1870, the dressing-room of the suite she had been wont to occupy, and especially the drawers of the bureau she had used, were redolent of that odor. The mortar employed in building the now ruined Mosque of Zobeide at Tauris, was mingled with a quantity of musk by the piety of the masons engaged in the work, and to this day the surrounding atmosphere is highly scented with it, especially when the sun shines upon the ruins. This extraordinary durability of the scent-producing quality has brought about various interesting experiments.

A French chemist once exposed a small quantity of musk, after weighing it, to the rays of the sun in a closed room. After a certain period the musk was again weighed, and was found to have lost no perceptible portion of its substance, even when the minutest tests were applied. Yet the scientific experimenter calculated that the volume of perfume evolved had amounted to no less a quantity than fifty-seven millions of particles. Hence a theory has arisen that the perfuming quality is not a substance, but is a series of vibrations that produce the same impression on the sense of smell that light does on the sight.