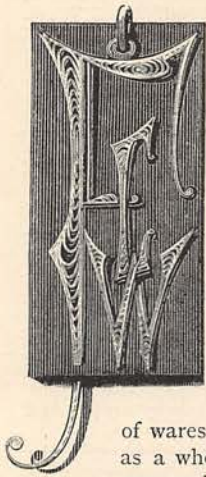


## THE MAKING OF GENOESE FILIGREE-WORK.



THINGS strike the visitor to Genoa, after he has exhausted the natural beauties of the place, more than the display of filigree-work. After he has scaled the heights of the superb city, and feasted his eyes on the wide sweep of sea and mountain, wandered along the narrow tortuous streets, and loitered in the galleries of her famous marble palaces, heard the solemn music of her gorgeous churches, and seen the busy life upon her quays, he turns to see what kind

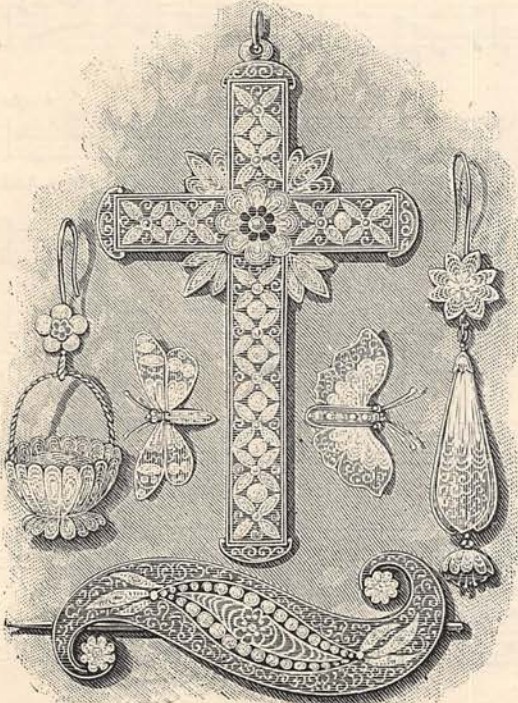
of wares she offers to the foreigner. Taken as a whole, the shops of Genoa do not present an imposing appearance; indeed, after the brilliant displays of Paris and Milan, they are small and poor, with the one brilliant exception of Goldsmiths' Street. It is almost singular that in a busy town like Genoa, the first commercial city of Italy, where labour in its heaviest and most practical form meets you on every side, an art so dainty should have had birth. Filigree-work, like many of the finer branches of industry, is an old art in India and China, and in Malta for a considerable time a trade has been carried on in this kind of ornament, which is simply an inferior imitation of Eastern work, and lacks the elegance of Genoese

design. This industry, for which Genoa is now unrivalled, and the fame of which is almost as wide as that of her rich velvets, is only about fifty years old. The chief features of the work were borrowed, like the Maltese, from India, but the independent spirit of the Genoese forbade them to remain mere imitators, and they soon grafted such original branches on the parent stem, that they established an industry distinctively their own. It is hardly necessary to say of such artistic work that it is produced by hands and not by machines.

A short time ago there was made in Genoa a model of the famous statue of Columbus, each hair of the head and beard being individually worked. The windows of Goldsmiths' Street present a dazzling variety of designs of most exquisite finish—baskets of fruit and flowers, monuments, towers and churches, whilst of smaller designs, in that branch of the art which is devoted to personal adornment, there is literally no end. You see ears of barley so light that the horns droop like the originals under the faintest breeze, insects with wings of gossamer lightness, flowers of every variety, with delicately veined leaves and distinct petals, half-opened pods with perfectly modelled peas within, shoes too dainty even for Cinderella, half-closed umbrellas, gondolas, bracelets in which the rare designs of the richest laces are faithfully reproduced; indeed, there is no limit to the profuse variety in design, as there is nothing lacking in elaborate finish. Like the prophet who has no esteem in his own country, these beautiful ornaments, which look as if they were the work of fairy fingers, find little favour at home, and are produced chiefly for foreign markets, a considerable trade, however, being done with the passing tourist.

With some difficulty we obtained admission to a filigree factory: this being a favour which is reluctantly granted, partly because most houses have a speciality in their industry, which they wish to retain, and into the working of which they do not care that curious eyes should peer; and partly because the attention of the worker being distracted from his work by the intrusion of a foreigner, will occasionally lead to the destruction of the delicate piece on which he is engaged.

These objections being at last overcome, we found ourselves, after ascending innumerable flights of stairs—for the houses of Genoa are frequently nine or ten storeys high—at the top of the house, where the work-rooms, on account of light, are generally situated. The bars of pure silver, from which the wire is drawn, are about a foot long and half an inch thick; and these are reduced by a process similar to that which transforms the ingot into the steel rail, by repeated passing through a machine, which provides for the making of every degree of thickness down to that of the finest hair. A great variety is required, as the backbone, so to speak, of the work is usually very strong, as are also the chief veins of leaves and the



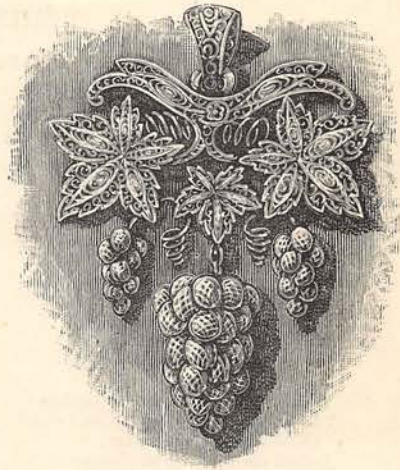
outer edges of flowers, whilst the design is filled in with coil as fine as a spider's web.

The peculiar appearance which we sometimes describe as "frosted" is produced by two fine strands being closely twisted together. When the wire has finally left the machine, it is handed into another room, where a woman sits at a little spinning-wheel, and quickly reduces the mass of shining coil into neat-looking reels; these reels are then passed on to a man, who cuts the wire into a given length; and these in turn are passed on to another, who forms them into the squares, ovals, or circles which are required for the order in hand.

Like pin-making, the labour is classified. The man who draws the wire does not glance at the cutting, whilst the cutter's mind, in turn, remains a perfect blank as to the moulding into shape. The shapes are then passed on to the women's work-rooms, which are the most interesting part of the exhibition, and apparently the most artistic, but at the same time the most poorly paid. Girls go to the work very young, the tiny fingers being most nimble; a very short apprenticeship serves to acquire sufficient knowledge of the art to earn small wages, which gradually increase until all the branches of the work are learned, but at best are never high. We inquired if this very fine work were not hurtful to the eyes, but were told it was not more so than other kinds of labour, and that this was never considered as an objection to the trade—spectacles enabling the worker to pursue her labour when her sight grew less strong. In most cases, however, as is usual in all feminine branches of work, marriage severs the connection at an early age.

The work-rooms were low, and a flood of light poured in from the glass roof overhead; what the temperature of these rooms would be under hot suns we hardly like to think; let us hope it is tempered by the fresh breezes from the mountains and the gulf. The workers sat round tables, each woman having before her a small bundle of fine wire, cut into one length, and a pot containing the form into which she was to weave a dainty pattern. The process, though most interesting, seemed simple, a pair of fine pincers being the only work-tool used. With these, with the deftness only long practice can give, the worker took up a strand of wire and, with the light touch of accustomed fingers, it grew with marvellous rapidity into a close coil, like a dainty shell; this with equal dexterity was fitted into the skeleton shape awaiting it, being worked open or close as the pattern required.

We were next conducted into the finishing-room, where men sat at a long table, and before each were laid the single leaves, circles, or wings which we had seen made; each was laid on a piece of charcoal, with solder on the part which had been bent into shape, but not joined; this is placed under a gas-jet, of which each man has one before him, and the gas-flame is then, by means of a short pipe, blown strongly upon it; the charcoal rapidly absorbs the heat, and becoming red-hot, the solder is melted, and the leaf is firmly and finally made. These separate pieces are then joined together, some receiving little additions in



the shape of beads or stars of silver, and then the flower or bird, in its completed beauty, is subjected to the operation of strong chemicals and fire, to bleach it into snowy whiteness, and the work is finished.

The gilt filigree differs nothing in manipulation, save that the silver wire is gilded before the process we have described commences. The blowing of the gas is the only part of the work which is injurious, and this branch, of course, is most highly paid, but the wages are not high even in this department. The only drawback to these ornaments is that—especially in England—they soon lose their purity, and require careful cleaning; but looking upon the wealth of design and perfection of finish, as it comes fresh from the factories of Genoa, we stand and marvel, and say it is fit to adorn Aurora for her bridal.

