

“HOW SHALL I CHOOSE MY HOUSE-LINEN?”



OF course the majority of readers will quickly turn over this leaf when their eye catches sight of those two words—“house-linen,” for naturally they will deem the subject to be a most prosaic and uninteresting one.

Nevertheless, it is of high importance to all housewives; and as I purpose to deal with the subject in a thoroughly practical manner, I doubt not but that the useful particulars herein jotted down, will be acceptable to those persons whose minds happen to be intent on providing their households with these most necessary articles of daily use.

In portioning out the money for the purchase of furniture, a goodly part should be set aside for the requisite house-linen, the several items of which form a somewhat lengthy catalogue, and, when added up in actual money, a considerable sum-total. Like the pots and the pans, and other seemingly insignificant but necessary appendages of a house, a great many pounds, shillings, and pence are swallowed up in their purchase, and yet there seems so little to show in comparison with the greatness of the outlay.

Here is a list of the items: Table-cloths and napkins, tray-cloths and d'oyles, kitchen table-cloths, glass, tea, knife, pudding, and dish-cloths; roller-towels and dusters; sheets, bolster and pillow-cases; chamber-towels and toilet-covers, with the addenda of quilts and blankets.

Allow me to remark to the world in general that housewives of the present day take scarcely enough pride in the display of house-linen. I am of opinion that the exhibition we see of it in dining-room, bed-chamber, and kitchen, is a great test of good or bad housewifery.

Maybe you will say, “We had no experience, and are suffering from the effects of an unwise choice at the outset. We did not know the merits and demerits of double and single damask, nor were we aware that a cloth in which cotton threads were intermixed with linen could never look smooth and glossy. Our sheets are rather short, our pillow-cases too narrow, our blankets will not be tucked in, and our quilts soon looked soiled; but we had no knowledge on these points to guide us.”

I am sorry if this be the case; but now make use of my experience, for very probably you will have to renew your stock ere long. A century or two ago, the store of house-linen with which a young couple started on setting up housekeeping, served their lives, and not uncommonly it was bequeathed to their descendants still fit for use; whereas, in these degenerate days, the original set has to be renewed every ten or fifteen years. We have not time to search into the actual cause of this; but I think the real reasons are probably these, that we do not provide ourselves with such a large stock as that with which our provident grandmothers were wont to fill their chests and presses; nor can it be denied that linen as now manufactured is not equal in durability to the homespun of olden days.

The price of wool, linen, and cotton rises and falls, as you know; therefore I do not pretend to note down the *exact* sums for which you may at any time obtain these articles. My object is to give you some notion of what the necessary outlay will be, in order that you may be able to make a rough calculation of the cost.

We will first consider the *table-napery*. The price of this depends on three things—*i.e.*, upon the size, the pattern, and whether of single or double damask. “Spots and sprigs” are less expensive patterns than those which have a centre design and a border. Single damask is little more than half the cost of double damask. However, as I am no friend of the former, I shall not quote the price of it; for, being single, it is naturally a thinner substance, and therefore it cannot look as well; it easily creases and crumples; nor is it able to exhibit its pattern in such strong relief as double damask.

As it would be impossible to enumerate the various sizes and their prices, we must take that of an ordinary table, which would require a cloth measuring  $1\frac{3}{4}$  by  $2\frac{1}{4}$  yards. The price of such an one with small pattern would be (in round figures) from 7s. to 12s.; with centre pattern and border, from 9s. to 22s.

Just to show how much money *may* be spent on table-linen, I will mention that the cost of a very long cloth—say eight or nine yards—would be at least £10 or £11, and the table-napkins to match would be £2 10s. the dozen.

It is now the fashion to have table-napkins larger than formerly. The medium size is surely the most convenient—26 by 30 inches; the prices of these vary from 13s. to 28s. per dozen for spots or sprigs. If you wish for beauty of design added to superiority of texture, you can procure it by paying an extra pound.

*Tray-cloths* are usually of uniform size—*i.e.*, 34 by 43 inches—and they range from 2s. 6d. up to 6s. 6d. each, according to quality and pattern. The small fringed d'oyles are useful for pastry, and cost from 3s. to 12s. per dozen.

In buying all these above enumerated, be sure that the linen is really *bonâ fide* linen. Go to a good trustworthy shop or warehouse, where you can depend on the word of the seller that no cotton is mixed in the materials you select. Table-napery will never please the critical eye if it is not pure linen, for it can never be made to look smooth or glossy.

For *kitchen or nursery table-cloths*, a strong half-bleached linen, sold by the yard, is the best; that 45 inches wide is about 1s. 6d. per yard.

*Kitchen cloths*.—The price of glass-cloths is according to the size. The medium one of 23 by 35 inches is the most convenient, avoiding as it does the common faults of being either too large or too small; these are about 6s. 6d. per dozen. For ordinary kitchen use the white loom towels, at 4s. the dozen, are the best; and for rough use the Forfar towels, price 3s. the dozen, are serviceable. The linen crash for

roller-towels is sold at the rate of 6d. per yard. Knife-cloths should not be too large, and half-a-dozen would suffice, which would cost about 1s. 6d. Nor should the pudding-cloths be forgotten, the linen for which is 7d. per yard.

*Dusters* are always a worry to housekeepers, for they are for ever disappearing, and never reappearing; and, moreover, they cost more than one would suppose. The union check dusters are the strongest and most durable, but the medium size is not to be had under 3s. 3d. per dozen. I do not recommend more than half-a-dozen of this kind, for they are too hard and stiff for polished surfaces. The "patent cotton" dusters are particularly adapted for furniture, but they are rather expensive, being 7s. the dozen. I find that glazed calico, either white or coloured, when the stiffening has been washed out, makes very nice soft dusters, and is considerably less expensive; but then I suggest that you take the trouble to hem them, or they will soon get torn, and then will be considered as rags.

Now let us turn to the bed-room requisites.

*Sheets.*—I don't suppose that our grandmothers would have allowed any cotton sheets to intrude into their linen-press, and yet how generally they are used now! I must confess to old-fashioned tastes—prejudice, if you will—and accordingly I turn up my nose at cotton sheets, and am half offended if expected to lie between them. I suppose it is, perhaps, only custom which has engendered this feeling, for I hear people declaim against linen as cold and comfortless. I think it cannot be denied, however, that linen wears longer and keeps its colour better than cotton.

The width of sheeting for a single bed should be about 66 inches, and for an ordinary-sized double bed 78 to 88 inches. The length should average two and a half yards; but if you want what are termed handsome sheets—namely, plenty to turn in and turn over—the proper length is three yards.

For ordinary use the linen should not be very thin or fine: a good medium quality may be had for 3s. per yard, the best quality being about 8s. Half-bleached linen is less in price, being from 2s. to 4s., according to width. A very serviceable sheeting, and one particularly fitted for winter use, is the twilled calico. The 78-inch width is 2s. 3d. per yard. Then there are what are called Bolton sheets, suitable for servants' beds. These are sold at prices varying from 3s. to 10s. per pair.

Linen is always preferable to calico for pillow-cases. Even if it be coarse, it will not soil so quickly as calico, however fine the latter may be. For 1s. 6d. a yard you should get a nice linen for this purpose.

*Chamber-towels.*—The huckaback towels are the best suited for every-day use. These can be bought in the piece, or the towel ready-made. The choice depends on whether you like a fringe or a hem as the finish.

Towels should be at least 35 or 40 inches long, for if short they will continually slip off the towel-rail. Towels made of good huckaback cost from 9d. to 1s. a-piece. For the guest-chamber, huckaback with

damask borders look the best. These cost about a shilling more than the plainer ones. There are also linen diaper towels. For those who prefer a soft towel, these have that trait; but they so soon get damp and wet, that it takes several of them to perform a duty which one alone would do if made of huckaback.

*The toilet-cover* requires a few words. Those cut off the piece and made at home are more satisfactory in every way. It is a great chance whether the size of the ready-made cover suits that of the dressing-table; and an inch or so too long, or too short, gives an untidy appearance. Very often, also, the fringe is poor, or badly sewn on, and after the cover is washed these defects appear. You will get a very nice material for 1s. 3d. per yard, and a dozen yards of the loop fringe for 1s.

A muslinette cover, bordered with a deep cambric frill, is particularly pretty for the "best bed-chamber."

*Quilts.*—The white Marseilles quilts, figured on both sides, look the handsomest, but they are rather heavy for summer use—one 2½ by 3 yards would cost a guinea. The cotton honeycomb is much lighter—in that size the price is 18s. Then there are what are called toilette-quilts—these range from 9s. to 33s. in that same size. Of course the patterns do not show effectively in the lower-priced ones, and the material is very loosely woven.

The old-fashioned knotted counterpane is still manufactured, and is the least expensive, being about 14s. for the above size. The coloured Alhambra counterpane is suitable for servants' beds—they are to be had for 5s. and 10s. In buying quilts for single beds, bear in mind that the difference in size should be in the width only. I forgot this the other day, and did not find out my mistake until too late to remedy it, and that short quilt troubles my eyes daily.

*Blankets.*—In respect to price, the Witney blankets are about the least expensive of the several kinds made. Take for instance a pair measuring 2½ by 3½ yards; the best quality of Witney would be 37s. 6d., the Irish the same, the Bath 53s. For single beds or under-blankets, of course this size would be too large. The price per pair of those measuring 1¾ by 2½ yards, Witney and Irish, is 15s. 6d.; of Bath, 20s.

Many people, who live in large and smoky towns, prefer the scarlet blankets to the white ones; these are more expensive in comparison, the prices running from 15s. to 40s. per pair. The blue-grey blankets are useful for servants' beds, and may be had from 7s. to 10s. 6d. the pair.

In the middle of last winter I spent a fortnight in a curate's cottage, and, owing to circumstances into which I need not enter, I had but one blanket on my bed; but happily for me it was a good one, and a new one, and I always felt quite a comfortable glow when enfolded in it. I passed on to another house, a mansion in comparison to the cottage, and there I had three blankets on the top of me; verily I speak the words of soberness and truth, when I say that these three together did not afford warmth equal in degree to that one good blanket I had just quitted. E.C.