

## WOMEN WHO WORK.

## NEEDLEWOMEN.



MARY BANKS, m'm? Yes, m'm, that's my name, as lives down at No. 9, Little Gosling Street, over the railway bridge. Oh, yes, m'm, I'll be certain to bring the work home to-night, and much obliged to you for it, I'm sure. I'm very glad of any work ladies can give me just now, for this is the slack time of the year, an' now I've a baby to take care on I can't go out to work in the shops as I'd used to do. No, ma'am, I'm not strong. I got a cough about a year ago. They said it was stooping over my needle late and early, an' sitting up of nights to finish work; but it's never quite gone away since, and somehow I don't seem to have picked up no strength at all after my little one's birth.

Do I take nourishing food? Well, m'm, thank you, I take what I can, but you see I've got to earn it first, an' there's my 'usband an' child to be kept as well as me. No, ma'am, he ain't in work—not for a good while back, I'm sorry to say. He's a very superior young man, is my 'usband, m'm, though it's I says it, an' 'as been a clerk ever since he were a mere boy, he 'as; so in course he *couldn't* take any common, low sort of work; an' he lost his last situation, as he'd 'ad goin' on of four year, in conseckence of the foreman speaking sharp to him. You see, m'm, 'Enery 'ad come late, but it was only onst in a way, and he didn't see that the foreman 'ad any call to go rowing 'im about it. He thought the master ought to ha' spoke to him himself if he were in fault, an' so he just took an' left. They offered 'im three pounds to go back, but his spirit was up, an' he wouldn't; an' he said besides that if he could get a similar place in a bigger shop in the City, it would pay him better. I dare say it would too, but somehow none on 'em hasn't seemed to want a clerk since then, or he hasn't seemed to suit 'em; an' in course some one must work, or else we should starve, so it falls on me to do it. Well, m'm, I dare say as he was a little hasty—that is, he might ha' put up with a trifle from the foreman, knowing our living depended on 'is situation; but men don't think on those things when they're put out, do they, pore fellows? And I only wish I was stronger, that I could do something else but sewing, for that ain't very paying work for a person situated like me, as 'as to take it 'ome.

Yes, m'm, I used to go out to work at one o' them big shops in the West End. Took up the best 'alf of the street, it did; and I were in the shirt-making department, an' very well paid and treated. I had to be there at eight. The work was all cut out for me an' the other young women. That's done by men—three of 'em; an' ain't they well paid for it too! Three pound a week the principal one. I wonder they don't employ a woman for that sort of thing, as I don't suppose they'd 'ave to pay 'er more than half; for women

never expects as 'igh wages as men for anythink, and it's easy work enough, once you know how. They uses knives instead of scissors, an' cut out three or four at a time from the one pattern. As soon as the shirts was cut out, we took 'em and tacked all the separate parts—sides, an' tails, an' sleeves, an' pleated fronts—all ready for the machinist, who took 'em from us as they were done, an' put 'em through the machine. We were paid eightpence each shirt, for that and hand-finishin' afterwards; but if we made the shirts by hand—all but collars, cuffs, an' fronts, which are always machined now—we got a shilling; and two if we did all the after-work too—putting in the little gussets, stitching down the collar, making the button-holes, &c. Made by hand to private order was two-and-sixpence, an' linen shirts three shillings. Anythink made to order is paid for at a 'igher rate than the stock shop goods, though they mayn't be done a bit better; an' all linen work is paid 'igher than cotton—it's so much harder to sew, an' takes longer time an' finer stitches; but everythink was expected to be as neatly done as possibly could be at that shop, nothing like slop-work would ha' been permitted for a moment. Flannel shirts, hand-made and finished, we was paid two-and-sixpence for; an' that's pleasant work, so soft an' easy. The tacking is pleasant enough too, when your 'and's in. I used to make from fifteen shillings to a pound a week at it.

No, m'm, we weren't given any food there. We took our dinners an' teas with us, an' were allowed an hour for each meal, an' the use of a gas stove for cooking at. We left at eight, and was allowed to take 'ome any unfinished piece of work, to finish there, which was a great 'elp. Also we were saved the dreadful worrit of being so keerful to keep the work from getting the least bit soiled, which we 'as to make such a point of in private work, and which is one of the 'ardest things with the young women in the dressmaking line, for everythink was washed before it was sent out. There was a laundry on the premises, an' sometimes when we 'ad an order for a dozen shirts one evening, they'd be all cut out, made, washed, and got up ready to wear by three o'clock next day.

Oh, yes, I liked working at that shop, because there was so much thought for everybody, even down to the lowest. Great big place as it was, the master 'imself used to superintend everythink, an' never even passed one of us tacking-girls without giving us "Good morning" or "Good evening," as pleasant as if we'd been 'is ekils; an' if there was a order on for which he were in a great 'urry, he'd come into the work-room perhaps, an' say—

"Now, please, I want you all to make great 'aste for me, an' finish this afore dinner. Take two hours instead of one, arterwards, to make up, if you like."

An', dear heart! we'd ha' done anythink for 'im, an' sewed away all day without our dinners, when he spoke that way. I wish all shops were like that one, but

they ain't—far from it! Why, at one where I worked some time, it was nothing but drive, drive, drive, an' 'urry, 'urry, an' sharp words all day. *And* the pay! Well, now, m'm, what d'you think they gave me for ladies' long white petticoats, made by hand, nine tucks in each, besides the seams, hem, band, and button-hole? Eightpence! Yes, it's true, an' they had to be so neatly done, I could 'ardly get more nor one an' a bit finished in the day. An' trimmed chemises, with pretty cross-over sleeves, an' two rows of feather-stitch on the insertion, was only tenpence. Ah! I've 'eard ladies praising of that shop, an' sayin' as the things was so reasonable, considering how beautifully they was made an' finished! Per'aps they wouldn't ha' thought so much of the reasonableness if they'd known it was at the expense of poor girls' fingers, an' eyesight, an' 'ealth. Work all day, an' 'alf the night too, I *couldn't* keep the rent paid an' buy food out of what I earned in that shop; an' I was expectin' my baby just then, an' not over-strong. I think that it was that first shook my 'ealth, and talkin' of it always minds me of some verses I've 'eard my 'usband sing:—

"Oh, men with sisters and wives!  
It is not linen you're wearin' out,  
But human beings' lives."

Leastways, I think that's how they go; but there, I'm always that busy I often get 'old of the wrong end of things, an' particularly of rhymes, for they run in my head as I sit over my work, an' get mixed up together some'ow.

How long do it take me to make a shirt by 'and? Well, m'm, it depends. I was doin' some linen ones for a lady's 'usband not long since. She was in a 'urry for 'em, an' I worked extra hard; but I don't think none on 'em took me less than a day an' a 'alf. Of course they'd the very best of work in 'em, an' she paid me very well—three-and-sixpence apiece.

Oh, yes, m'm, private work pays much better than shops as a rule. That's 'ow you often manage to get ready-made things so much cheaper than you can buy the material an' put it out to be made. You couldn't do it otherwise. There's very few shops like that big one as I was a-telling you of at first.

After my baby was born, an' I'd lost the shop-work, an' not got any private connection, times was very hard for me. Pore 'Eney! he couldn't stand it, an' went to stay with 'is mother, as is a dressmaker, an' 'as now and then 'elped me to get a bit of work through the ladies as employed her. Very kind it is of her too, for in course she didn't think me good enough for 'er son, as was only a nursery-maid when I married 'im; and certainly he might ha' done much better; but we was too fond of one another to think of that at the time, neither of us; an' I'm sure I *do* try to be a good wife to 'im. But just then it was slack time with 'er also, an' I had to get what I could for myself, an' was glad of anythink.

No, thank God! my baby has never suffered much. It's a small, delicate-looking thing; but it's never 'ad a day's illness since it was born; an' that's the greatest blessin' in my life. I'm sure I praise the Lord for it

every night and mornin'; for what I should ha' done if she 'ad ailed, or been sickly, as so many children are, I don't know. As it is, I'm often obliged to neglect her on account of the work, an' it's gone to my heart sometimes, when I've been sitting hour after hour at somethink that there was a 'urry for, to hear the pore little lamb wail, wail, wailin' to be taken up an' nursed. One cold night in particular I remember. She was teething, an' that always makes children cross; an' I'd had to leave her all the afternoon on the bed, so that I really thought she'd 'ave screamed 'er-self into convulsions. I kept lifting 'er up every now an' then, an' giving 'er the warm bottle; but milk an' water ain't as comfortin' as bein' in a mother's arms, an' 'er pore little mouth was that sore an' inflamed that she couldn't touch it; so, at last, I wrapped the blanket round her—for there wasn't no fire—an' took her on my knee, an' tried to go on with my work too. That had to be finished, for it was part of the trousseau for a young lady, an' 'er mother wanted the things on the morrer. Well, baby she was quiet at first arter I took 'er, and cooed an' crowed quite 'appily, till I thought she was goin' off to sleep; but the movement of my hands an' the rustling work teased 'er; an' she began to scream again, an' got so restless that I 'ad to walk up an' down the room with 'er, trying to stitch at the same time; but, as you may guess, m'm, the work didn't get on neither fast nor well; an' though I laid 'er down to cry again afore long, an' sat up till near-dawn finishin' of it, the lady as I took it round to in the mornin' said it was infamous: such long stitches here, an' such careless work there; an' as I'd done the first ones all right, it must have been sheer idleness. Babies? Oh, that was nonsense. People who took in work, and were paid for it, ought to pay other people to mind their babies. If there had been time, she'd 'ave given me them back to unpick and do all over again; as there wasn't, I was to understand that it was only slop-work, and should be paid for accordingly; and so she only gave me half-price for each, an' sent me off. Ma'am, my rent was overdue then; and the full sum would only just ha' paid it, so if my landlord 'adn't been more merciful than that lady, we might ha' been all turned into the street along of my poor little baby. It'll be easier to get work when she's bigger, an' can run about; only then in course she'll cost more to feed an' clothe too.

Oh, yes! ma'am, there's a many worse off than me. You wouldn't believe it if you 'eard what some of the pore needlewoman an' slop-workers earn down in the City. People 'ave written an' spoken about that often enough, an' many thinks as it's all done away with now; but it isn't, ma'am; it's just going on the same as ever, an' worse if possible. Don't you remember a few months ago hearin' of a case where a pore woman was engaged to work for a large firm of army contractors, an' machined soldiers' trousers at a penny three-farthings the pair? It don't sound believable, do it, ma'm? an' I'd 'ardly 'ave believed it myself if I 'adn't seen it printed there in the papers, and proved to be true. Well, I *have* done better than *that*, an' thankful I am for it, too.