

WHERE CAN I DISPOSE OF MY NEEDLEWORK?



NO point of interest is information so much needed, and so urgently sought for in the present day, as on this—the question with which I have headed my article. The pressure of poverty among the educated classes is so great, and the wolf at the door so fierce and pitiless, that women as well as men must aid in the struggle to live. The case is indeed a hard one when, in addition, such an appearance of gentility must be kept up as will satisfy Mrs. Grundy. In her eyes, poverty is the unpardonable sin, and the “dignity of labour” nowhere.

These facts have led to the formation, in London especially, of various charitable societies, under the patronage, and sometimes the immediate direction, of many ladies of high rank and position, for the disposal of the work of their more necessitous sisters. They work under various rules; some make inquiries as to the circumstances of the applicant, and some do not; but all of them throw an absolute veil of secrecy over the identity of their subscribers; rightly judging that poverty is a sufficient evil of itself, without the aggravation of publicity.

The last census of the United Kingdom, which gives a surplus of half a million more of women than men, ought to have destroyed the time-honoured illusion of parents, that their daughters will all become happy wives and mothers, and will thus need no further provision made for them; and when to this calculation we add a goodly proportion of widows, it is evident that we have among us a great number of women who must earn their living, wholly or in part. To help the latter class is the object. The addition of £15 or £20 a year to their incomes, for dress and many small comforts, would lighten the heavy burden on the shoulders of many an over-worked man, who can keep his family only by an expenditure of strength which ultimately costs him his life. A girl who is willing to exert herself, and is clever at her needle, can, through the medium of these societies, earn sufficient money to dress herself, and so relieve some of her parents' anxieties. I do not consider it

possible that a woman can wholly maintain herself, as a lady, by her needle. The utmost she can earn by continual application is from £1 to 30s. per week, even in the higher branches of embroidery and art needlework. Very fine plain work is also highly paid for, particularly infants' *layettes*, and the finer parts of wedding *trousseaux*. I have been told lately of a lady who can earn nearly £3 a week by it, but she is a rare instance, as few women are so quick, or work so well. There is no demand whatever, at present, for the old-fashioned so-called “fancy work.” Cardboard boxes, impossible puppy-dogs in Berlin wool work, straw photograph frames, and a multitude of other atrocities, too numerous to mention, are perfectly unsaleable articles at the depôts of the various societies, where members are allowed to place a certain number of things on exhibition. These societies are, in fact, shops; and the eternal principles of “demand and supply” must apply to them as well as to others.

The *Renaissance* of what is called “Art Needlework,” at South Kensington, has completely changed the style in England, and we have gone back to the fashions of the twelfth, thirteenth, and fourteenth centuries. Then Englishwomen were famed for their skill with the needle, and not without good reason, as the visitor to the South Kensington Museum can readily see. But, alas! education in this branch has retrograded instead of progressed, for the Englishwoman of the present day can rarely bring to her aid the patient industry and the skilful fingers of her ancestress of the twelfth century.

The oldest Work Society in the metropolis is the Association for the Sale of Work by Ladies of Limited Means, 47, Great Portland Street, W. It has been established eighteen years, and, I think, had its origin in Bath. It has 275 working members, and during the term of its existence has earned £17,000. This society is a charity; the workers must be ladies, who obtain their nominations from the honorary members. These have the right to make one nomination a year, for their one guinea subscription. The worker must also have two certificates of qualification. The annual subscription is 2s. 6d. in advance; and a penny in the shilling is deducted from the price of their work, which is priced by themselves. They are permitted to have £5 worth of work on view at the depôt at a time. The society pays postage, and forwarding expenses, for its workers; and gives money and clothing also. Last Christmas a little sheet was published by them, containing some really heart-rending stories of want and trouble—cases which they had endeavoured to relieve.

The Ladies' Industrial Society, at 11, Porchester Street, Upper Berkeley Street, is open to every one in need of earning money by the sale of their needlework, quite independent of the fact of their being rich or poor, rightly supposing that even rich women would not want to sell their own work without good reason.

for so doing. The workers here also pay a penny in the shilling on sold work, and can keep a dozen pieces of work at the *dépôt*, for which the fee is 5s. annually.

The Ladies' Work Society was removed from North Audley Street to 31, Sloane Street, last year. H.R.H. the Princess Louise is the president, and gives the society the benefit of her undoubted talent as a designer, many of the beautiful pieces of art needlework being executed from her drawings. Each worker must send a sample of her work, before the yearly admission fee of 7s. 6d. can be received, and she is allowed to participate in the benefits of the society.

At the Gentlewomen's Self-Help Institute, at 15, Baker Street, Portman Square, no annual subscription and no commission is taken from the worker; but most particular inquiries are made into every case, and excellent certificates are required. The benefits derived from this society are very great, including even medical advice for its members when needed, and they are fortunate in obtaining a great deal of ordered work. This, of course, pays the best, and also offers to the good workers constant employment. The society supplies the workers with materials at cost price, and has a small loan fund also.

Mrs. Elliott's Work Society has no *dépôt* as yet in London. Her P.O. address is 75, Old Broad Street, E.C. The orders are sent for the members to their homes, at Mrs. Elliott's expense; postage also being paid by her. When the work is done the expenses are deducted from the money received.

At the Crystal Palace, and also at the Alexandra, there are stalls for the sale of the work of necessitous ladies. Inquiries can be made by post of Mrs. Ellis Cameron, 9, Lullington Road, Anerley, who is the honorary lady superintendent. Mrs. S. C. Hall, and Mr. M. F. Tupper, were much interested in the founding of these stalls, and have instituted money prizes for the best work.

The Ladies' Dressmaking, Millinery, and Embroidery Association is a comparatively new attempt to provide gentlewomen of limited means with instruction in needlework. An anxious desire is also manifested to place the work on a purely business footing, and to obtain trade orders for their principal support. It is, of course, difficult to make women business-like and methodical in their habits; and in such an association punctuality is also a necessary virtue. The offices and workrooms are at 42, Somerset Street, Portman Square. The hours of work are from 10 a.m. to 7 p.m. In the dressmaking department no fee is charged for admission, and the amount earned by the workers in the week is from 8s. to 10s. They are anxious to obtain young ladies as apprentices, particularly in fine-art embroidery. An entrance fee of £5 5s. is required in this branch, and the work is paid for by the piece, which secures good pay for a quick worker.

These societies spend no money in advertisements, hence they are not so widely known as they ought to be. The class they endeavour to assist is one requiring the utmost delicacy to assist with advantage.

I cannot press too much upon the earnest consideration of mothers the duty of paying the greatest attention to sewing, mending, darning, and patching, and all kinds of fine work. Study of the art embroidery stitches should not be neglected; although, to achieve great success in this branch, a girl should also have a knowledge of drawing, and designing, some smattering of botany, and a knowledge of the structural development of plants. These should be studied at one of the branches of the School of Art, and one term of instruction would be sufficient for a clever girl. I am not now speaking of one who desires to make this occupation a profession, and to give it both time and attention; but only of the degree of culture needful to earn a small additional sum, for dress or amusement. If it is to be a profession, then the School of Art Needlework, of course, offers the greatest advantages, and a longer training; as candidates are expected to be able to work eight hours a day at the school itself, if required. The entrance fee of £5 is, on some occasions, allowed to be worked out; this is, however, a matter of special arrangement.

The use of needlework in house decoration has become so general, that I hope it will be no transient fashion, in spite of some recent evil prophecies to the contrary. Berlin wool and point-lace work are both cited as instances of styles that have had their day, and departed to the limbo of bygone fashions; and this, say the croakers, will be the end of art needlework. With this opinion I cannot agree, and I am sustained by many others in my opinion. Point-lace when best accomplished never looked like the antique lace it was intended to imitate; this failure was undoubtedly caused by the difference in the purity of the linen threads respectively used for working. Berlin wool work was perhaps the most useless and evanescent of work, as well as that which least repaid the time and money spent upon it. It was thoroughly uncreative, and so mechanical as to be completely uninteresting. None of this reasoning, nor these complaints, can apply to crewels. A clever artist draws not only her own design, but invents her own stitches on some occasions; and no labour so truly one's own could be uninteresting.

The worst of it is that the materials of the present day are not so good as those of a couple of centuries ago, when the worker probably spun her own linen, and dyed her own wool; for the adulteration of to-day has even crept in here; and Matilda's great achievement, the Bayeux tapestry, would never have been in existence now if worked with the materials of to-day. I scarcely think, however, that there lives the woman who could either undertake it, or carry it out. The patient industry is wanting, if nothing else.

This last forms a part of "the tender grace of a day that is dead," which the women of those warlike, uncertain, and unsafe times learnt in silence and solitude. In my imagination the faces of those laborious tapestry-workers always come before me with the shadow upon them of a piteous waiting, and a patient heart-break.

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