

A SONG OF A SKIRT.



ES, decidedly, I must have

one—a new skirt, I mean; also a new polonaise; likewise a new outside jacket; in fact—I may just as well out with it at once—a whole new costume.

Now this need of mine—a new costume—is one which I ex-

perience in common with thousands of other ladies in England at various times and seasons. For myself, though I may call myself a provincial, I happen to be living in London just at present, and I really know nothing easier in the world than for a lady living in London, and who has money in her purse, to procure herself a new costume. One would suppose the only drawback to be the embarrassment of the choice; yet there is something else, even in a matter so simple as the ordering of a new dress: the conscientious woman of fortune finds the gaunt spectre of duty standing between her and the frills and furbelows of her new skirt; and this remorseless monitor shakes his phantom-head at her reproachfully, and says, "Will you be good enough to tell me what amount of Christian charity you are going to trim this new gown with? Is any poor widow going to earn a nice mutton-bone out of your whalebone? Will suffering children profit by this gratification of your vanity in the shape of a smart outfit, of which you have really no pressing need? Come now, sing me the song of your skirt, and let me see if it sounds like a hymn of humility, or a pæan to human selfishness and insatiable female coquetry."

This was the sort of thing that was buzzing in my ears while I was examining the beautiful new costumes at the great establishments; and by it the persuasive prattle of the trim clerks was deadened to my ears, and I could scarcely give heed to what they were cooing. But worse than what duty said to me was what it caused to dance before my eyes, so persistently that colours and tints faded, and in place of tilleul and flame, and mandarin and lemon, the last new hues from dainty Paris, I saw little else than a miserable collection of types which I had deciphered in a morning paper, and which I found on perusal had the effrontery to promulgate the following plebeian sentiments:—

"DRESSMAKING.—Ladies' work solicited by a young person *who is in urgent need of it*. Five years' West-end experience. Style and fit guaranteed." (Here followed the address.)

"That will be a lovely costume, madam," cooed the clerk in the great shop; "and very cheap," he murmured, with a touch of scorn—"only eight guineas. Shall I take your order, ma'am, please?" and he moistened his pencil-tip enticingly, with the air of one who is not to be refused.

"I—I—that is—not to-day, I think," I stammered in reply; and beneath the astonished and justly indignant gaze of his eagle-eye I hastened ignominiously away.

The next thing I knew, I was on my way to the locality indicated in the advertisement, with the fixed intention of bestowing my patronage upon the young person who was in urgent need of it, and whose style and fit were guaranteed. What bonds she entered into as a guarantee of style and fit I knew not, nor cared. Perhaps she would exact them of me. I was capital, she labour. Capital furnishes money; labour, brains and execution. It is the duty of capital to assist labour; to foster its hampered genius, and with its golden key unlock the grimy castle wherein dwell fame and the universal esteem of the entire world. What sort of an amazing arrangement this new dress of mine was to be, when it burst in its completed glory upon dazed London, the united product of my capital and the labour and brains of the young person who was in urgent need, was a secret the coy future had yet to disclose.

At the number of the street given I found a tiny shop, whose small, many-paned window, seemed to suggest its erection somewhere back in the Middle Ages, and which, if erected then, had apparently not been cleaned since. At first I thought that the articles purveyed within must be those luscious products of mother earth which (without the least disrespect to them, be it said) are very dirty in their personal habits—potatoes, mushrooms, celery, and the like. Closer scrutiny demolished this small pretence for untidiness, for the wares exposed proved to be a few ghastly toys—a very dirty lamb, a faded blue horse, with yellow spots, and various other parodies on the animal kingdom, so insulting to the races represented as to give a hint that they might have been built in derision by some revengeful vivisectionist. The toy trade was supplemented by an appeal to the sweet tooth of the neighbourhood, by a limited, and I thought not very tempting, display of dust-coated candy, discontented acid drops, and a few bronzed and hardened chocolate creams, soured no doubt by their lack of success in finding eaters.

The counter being without an attendant, I rapped lightly upon it with my umbrella-handle. A faded red curtain, hanging over a narrow orifice in a corner, was drawn aside, and the face of a homely old-young woman peered through. If this was the young person whose style and fit were guaranteed, it seemed a pity

that the style and fit of her own apparel should be so poor an earnest of what her customers might expect. However, duty said, "Do me!"—do duty!—and I did it, and was done.

I asked the young person if it was she who had advertised, to which she replied in a low and gentle voice, Yes; and would I kindly step this way—namely, through the orifice, under the red curtain. I did so, and at once found myself in a tiny box of a room, whose sole furniture was a high and unsteady table, over which another young person, of a similar appearance to the first one, was wearily bending, and stitching away on a holland bag. She looked up at me with dull eyes as I entered, and the squalor of the place, and the thoughts it irresistibly suggested of the utter unloveliness of life with such surroundings, cast a gloom over my spirits which I find difficult to describe. With a sigh I recalled the bright scene which I had left behind me in the gay shop, with its piles of splendid merchandise, its trim and flattering attendants, its brilliant throng of patrons. I felt that I had set out on a Quixotic errand, and that it would have been much wiser, as well as much pleasanter for me, to order the costume I wanted at the great mart where every appliance of perfection was at hand. Nevertheless, the knowledge that my self-sacrifice might shed a ray of gladness on these darkened lives went far to reassure me against the growing conviction that I had—pardon the inelegant phraseology—made a great fool of myself.

To abbreviate this recital, let me state that, all preliminaries being settled, I ordered the materials necessary for my costume, and they were sent in due course to the dressmaker. There was no saving effected on the dress, but that I did not expect. There must be some profit in the making of it, however, I reasoned, and this profit I determined in my case should go to add to this poor young woman's comfort, rather than to swell the already plethoric pockets of some pecunious king-trader. All that I asked of her was, that she should make my dress well, and give me no cause to regret that I had selected her, and not the wealthy merchant, as the recipient of my guineas.

The day fixed for the essaying of my experiment, or in other words the trying on of my bodice, brought the first disappointment. In an ill-written and badly-spelt scrawl, couched in a form of sentence formal enough for a reigning sovereign to use to an importunate boot-black—if such a correspondence could possibly take place—she informed me that she would not be able to see me that day, on account of having mourning to make. I accepted the apology perforce, and waited patiently for several days. At last she came; and I may say at once that from the moment of the beginning of the dress until its completion, there was a series of mistakes, misfortunes, misapprehensions; and, as a sum-total, the work was a complete botch. "It doesn't fit, I know," she said, not petulantly, but rather like a cross and peevish child; "but I've not been well, and I'd a person sewing for me, and she stole three shillings out of my purse, and a yard and a half of ribbon, and——"

"Come in here," I said gently to her, "I've something to say to you." She followed me into an inner room, where I knew we should be undisturbed; and then I spoke to her in a grave voice.

"All my life," I said, "I have been interested in poor girls—like yourself. I have done what I could to aid them, but the best aid any one human being can give another is to help him, or her, to help himself or herself, as the case may be. Do not think of the dress which has been the subject of discussion, but take what I am going to say on general principles—that is, as the advice of a woman who has seen a great deal of the world, who has travelled in many countries, and whose natural impulse it is on every occasion to lend a helping hand to those of her own sex who need it. In fighting the battle of life, remember the only weapon that will do you any real service is EXCELLENCE. If you put first-class excellence in your work, you will command first-class custom in course of time, depend upon it."

She murmured something about the cruelty of these great shops—they took all the custom—poor sempstresses were ground down to the last penny—ladies were very unkind to go to the shops instead of helping poor struggling persons like herself, &c.

"Why do ladies patronise the shops, can you tell?" said I. "Why, for this reason principally—that they know what they order at the shops *will be done*. In the making of this one dress of mine you have employed a half-dozen excuses to cover your lack of business qualities. You have sent me word you had mourning to make, that you had headache, that you had toothache, that your little sister was ill; on two occasions you failed to come or send any word whatever. Is that a business-like way of conducting a trade?"

She answered (in effect) that there was no chance to get ahead at all; the great shops monopolised everything, and try as one would, &c.

"You have heard of the great man-milliner of Paris?" I asked of her.

"Oh! yes," she said; "every one has heard of him."

"Well," I continued, "I knew that man when he was a poor boy—a young English lad, a petty clerk in an old-established ladies' outfitting house in Paris. Did the future appear to present much scope for fame and fortune to a youth with such slender opportunities? Yet he contrived so persistently and continuously to put excellence in his work, to do what he had to do with such enthusiasm and good taste, that it gradually became the fashion for ladies of high rank to desire his attendance when they gave an order. And so he made his way, never flagging, aiming for the highest artistic standard in the making of ladies' gowns, as earnestly and lovingly as if he were a painter panting to obtain the laurel-wreath of glory in that fairy-like art, and see his pictures hung upon the line at the Royal Academy. You know how he has succeeded. When he left the house where he was employed so long, and which had had a flourishing trade for more than half a century before this Englishman was born, he carried nearly the whole of the paying customers of the house with him, and left the firm aghast to face

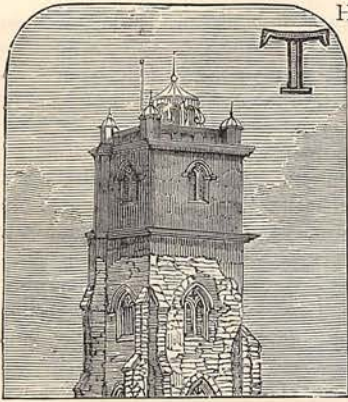
bankruptcy. He is now rich and famous, and it is said Continental princesses invite him to dinner."

She didn't think, she said, snipping out the threads of the botched sleeve with her blunt scissors, that any princess would ever invite her to dinner; and the grimmest silence on my part gave the most cordial consent and corroboration to her views on this head.

And so endeth the Song of the Skirt. But I have a few generalisations to make. My costume has been altered so that it is now a passable fit; but I have not heard of any one being struck with amazement at it, and I am sure it has never been reported in any fashionable chronicle. I shall continue to bestow a portion of my patronage upon the needy young person. Other ladies must judge whether or no it is their duty to do the

same towards some impecunious needleworker of their acquaintance. But the real lesson this story conveys is for the workers themselves. We hear a great deal in these days about the injustice done to women as a sex, how they are kept down and prevented from rising merely because they are women and not men. Such talk is idle. What the world wants is EXCELLENCE, and whenever excellence in any branch of endeavour is achieved by a woman, she receives the highest guerdon of reward for it, just the same as if she were a man. Miss Thompson paints pictures, and the man-milliner makes dresses, and both command the market in their respective ways, not because one is a man and the other is a woman, but because each has aimed at excellence, and achieved it. OLIVE LOGAN.

THE BURIAL OF A BUBBLE.



THE clock of the ancient City church of St. Hans-by-the-Wall was sonorously announcing the hour of one p.m. Hans Court, of which the church formed one whole side, appeared comparatively silent and deserted; all the morning its well-worn flags

had resounded with the footsteps of business men, as they hurried in and out of the court from the main thoroughfare, entering into and emerging from the old-fashioned houses now occupied as offices, in ceaseless succession. But at present there was a lull. Some were engaged at luncheon, others had recently finished that repast, and a few moments' relief from the turmoil of money-making seemed to be the order of the day.

In one of the queer tumble-down tenements that faced the entrance to the busy street, a solemn ceremony was about to take place. A Bubble was to be buried!

The mourners, of whom I unfortunately formed one, had been summoned to assemble at half-past one. Not being a business man myself, I had time to stroll quietly up the court, and found myself entering the fusty-looking blue baize doors some twenty minutes before the appointed time. Walking through the dingy little office, I was stopped by a depressed-looking red-haired clerk, who slowly and sadly placed a quill pen in my hand, and, pointing to a sheet of foolscap, whispered his desire that I should inscribe my name thereon, and also the extent to which I was interested in the poor defunct Bubble. Having performed this mysterious rite, I was forthwith ushered into a room of good size, where several benches had

been placed for the reception of the mourners. At the further end of the apartment I remarked a small sinister-looking door, possibly for the entrance of the chief undertaker and his assistants. Round the dust-begrimed walls were hung maps and notices of strange import, suggesting to a fanciful and sombre imagination the marble scrolls and epitaphs of the village church of our youth. Doubtless these were the memories of other departed Bubbles.

The place, at the time I entered, was anything but crowded; in fact, one solitary old gentleman in a corner seemed to be the sole occupant, and he appeared to be devoting all his energies to sucking the ivory knob of his lettuce-shaped umbrella, and counting the holes in the old oilcloth that decorated the chamber of woe. Observing more narrowly, however, I discovered another human being in a small species of open cupboard, something akin to the mantlet at a rifle range, where the marker sits shot-proof, ready to count the shots and score the damage. In this box was a desk with writing materials, behind which sat a fat, smooth, beautifully dressed little man. He paid not the slightest attention to my fellow-mourner or myself, but continued to scribble monotonously till the ceremony began. In a short time people commenced to drop in, and a low hum of converse relative to the demerits of the dead Bubble made itself heard. Just as I had assured myself that there were exactly fifteen of us, all told, the clock struck sharply the half-hour, the fat man's pen stopped, the door at the opposite end was flung open, and five gentlemen faultlessly arrayed crept softly into the room, seating themselves behind the large table that happily intervened between them and the small but dangerous-looking posse of Bubble-holders.

The chairman was a tall, lean man, with a cold blue eye that shone out of a ferret-like face, which in its turn was fastened on to the body in the same manner that nature has thought proper to fashion the cranium of the puff-headed adder or the cobra-di-capello. The others seemed to be ordinary-looking business men, whose rôle consisted in silently assenting to the