THE OUT-DOOR BUSINESS GIRLS OF LONDON.

BY ONE OF THEM.

SOCIETY is composed of three great classes—those who work, those who do not, and those who shuffle through existence, whose idleness is toil, and whose toil is useless both to themselves and the community. It is of one section of these three classes that this article would very briefly treat—the *out-door business* girls of London.

In the whole world there is nothing more absolutely pitiable than the actual every-day life, stripped of all its illusions, of a large number of girls and young women in this city. Labouring under the idea that "business" in London means short hours, high wages, unlimited amusements, perfect freedom from all restraint, a young girl leaves her quiet but respectable home in the country—not unfrequently runs away—and arrives one fine afternoon at Euston or Paddington, with a good supply of decent clothing, a few pounds in her purse, a large fund of hope, a Bible in the bottom of her trunk, and the address of a friend or acquaintance who preceded her in the chimerical journey after ease and happiness. She drives at once to the street where her friend resides, and has no difficulty in discovering the number; it is a tall and, to the young country girl, a magnificent-looking house, with a stone portico and stuccoed front, but she is a good deal confused by the number of bells which adorn one side of the door. Ringing one of them at random, she awaits the opening of the large portal with eager impatience. A sharp-visaged woman, with a fretful baby in her arms, presently appears, and glances questioningly at the stranger, who asks timidly if Miss A is at home.

"Don't know," is the surly response. "What floor is she on?" Miss B (the stranger) stares in bewilderment. "Has she the parlours, or drawin'-room, or second floor, or what?" the woman continues impatiently.

"I do not know, I'm sure."

"Better ring the landlady's bell and find out then," she says, marching off angrily, without indicating which is the landlady's bell. Pulling another, the girl, after a long delay, brings down an aged crone from the third floor, who knows nothing about Miss A, and doesn't want to know anything about her, or any other "botherin' lot of women," and goes away muttering imprecations. Finally, by trying each in succession, the landlady's bell is discovered. She comes up from the basement, grumbling too. "Miss A is out," she says shortly; "won't be home till late—never is—her room is locked—and she's got the key."

"Can you let me have a room for to-night?" Miss B asks in a choking voice.

"No, I'm full," is the ungracious reply. "Better go to an hotel." Which advice she follows, because she has no alternative.

Early the next morning she calls again, and learns that Miss A is gone to business. She asks the landlady if she told her friend that she had been. The woman declares she never sees Miss A except on Friday night, when she pays her rent. "Does she know her business address?" "No, that she don't, she can't be worried with people's addresses." So, disappointed and disheartened, Miss B returns to her hotel and writes to her friend, trusting that she will at least receive the letter: which she does, just as she is going out to business the next morning. When work is over Miss A rushes to the hotel, embraces her old friend affectionately enough, invites her to stay with her "till she can find a place," drags her away in a fearful hurry, and, as soon as the stranger and her boxes are fairly inside the door of a little room on the top floor of the great house, Miss A rushes off. She has an engagement, she says, and is late. "Good-bye, old girl; make yourself at home; I'll be back as soon as I can"—and the friend is gone.

Miss B sits down on her box and looks round the garret, for the room is nothing else—stares in dismay and wonder at the hopeless confusion that reigns everywhere. A bed, a chair, a little table—littered with every conceivable thing—a few boxes, a few nails in the wall, faded flowers, fragments of decayed fruit, paper cuffs, yards of dirty frilling, and other discarded finery, on the floor; unwashed beer-glasses, battered beer-cans, on the chimney-piece; a month's cinders in the grate—disorder, dust, untidiness everywhere! Ten, eleven, and twelve o'clock strike, and still Miss B sits in the close stifling room, waiting in dire uneasiness for her friend. Presently she comes blundering up the stairs in the dark.

"What, not in bed, old lady? Had any supper?" she says.

"No, thanks; I wasn't hungry."

"Not even a glass of beer?"

"No; I don't drink beer, dear. But where am I to find a room, Kate?" Miss B asks wearily, "and what am I to do?"

"Why can't you live with me?" Miss A says. "I pay five bob a week for this, but I dare say the old woman will let us have it for three each. It's in an awful muddle now, but I give it a rub and a clean on Saturdays, if I have time."

"How is business?" Miss B questions.

"We're having a drive just now. Come round with me in the morning, and I'll ask the governor if he can give you anything to do."

"Thanks. Why don't you ask after them at home?" Miss B says wonderingly.

"Oh, bother that lot! Come to bed, old girl; we must be at business at half-past eight."

"And where's business, dear?"

"Oh, miles away—in Oxford Street. Good night!"

Weary, disappointed, half suffocated, Miss B lies awake for hours, heartily wishing herself back in her little country home, where everything was at least neat and orderly, yet not possessing the moral courage to return. In the morning she gets up with a racking headache. Miss A owns to one also, and proposes as a remedy "a little drop of brandy." "It will do you good," she says confidently, turning into a public-house. Miss B is horrified, but after some persuasion and "chaff" she consents.

"What time do you have breakfast?" she asks presently.

"Never have any. How can I get a breakfast and go all this way to business? besides, I never seem to want any."

"Supposing they should not require me at your place, what am I to do?" Miss B asks.

"Get a paper, and see what's doing. Here we are." Miss A led the way into a large warehouse, and marching up to the manager, said coolly, "Anything for my friend Miss B to do, sir?"

"What can she do?"

"Skirts, bodies, mantles."

"We're busy in the mantle-room, take her there."

"I don't know a bit about——"

"Shut up, will you," Miss A whispers. "I don't know anything either, but we needn't tell all creation that. Take what's given you, do the best you can, and keep quiet."

Miss B was given a piece of work, which she got through somehow. At noon her friend brought her a sandwich and a glass of beer, reminding her that in future she must provide for herself. At five o'clock she had a cup of tea; at half-past eight she got away from business.

"Look here, old girl," Miss A says, as they walk home together, "you look as ancient as my grandmother. Pitch those cotton gloves away, and I'll buy you a pair of kid; get one of those white ties, and I'll doctor your hat and lend you a decent *gamp*; then, if you put on a bit of powder and a fall, you'll not look such a guy. We'll go home this evening and straighten you out, and to-morrow I'll introduce you to a nice fellow, who'll show you the sights."

On reaching their room Miss A twists her friend's hat into a fantastic shape, ties back her dresses to the extreme limit, tumbles her neatly-folded clothes over the dirty floor, and, in the midst of the litter, asks what they're to have for supper. Miss B does not mind in the least; so Miss A goes for a bit of bread-and-cheese and a pot of porter, which comes to sixpence—fourpence for the porter, a penny for the bread, and a penny for the cheese. The supper is eaten standing, without plate or knife, and then Miss A declares that she "positively must take back the cans to the pub," and accordingly takes them off, not in the least abashed.

It is early in the season, and for two months there is plenty of work. At the end of that time Miss B has fallen into the free-and-easy London ways, and is almost as much at home as Miss A. She goes here and there with any one who will take her, and being a good-looking girl she has plenty of admirers. They take her to a theatre or a music-hall; they have supper after, and make her cheap presents—gloves, ties, aluminum jewellery—fill her head with poisonous flattery, and her stomach with poisonous drink. She returns to the disorderly, ill-ventilated garret at midnight or morning, lets herself in with her latch-key, tumbles wearily to bed, goes out to business breakfastless, has "a drop of neat brandy" or a dose of sal volatile, and goes through the same round the next day and the next. On Sunday the friends lie in bed till nearly noon, then they get up lazily; one goes out to some side street and buys something for dinner, which they cook and eat in the untidy garret, and leave the *débris* about in all directions. Then they have "a drop of something to drink," and lounge about half-dressed through the afternoon. At six o'clock, when the public-houses open, they have another glass of beer, and then, if they happen to have an appointment, they dress and go out; if not, they end the day as they began it—shiftlessly, thriftlessly, unprofitably—making a bonnet or altering a dress with the most perfect unconcern; or, perhaps, one will go to bed, or the other idle over the pages of a pernicious penny paper. Religion is a thing unthought of, the Bible an unopened book, a clergyman an unheard-of phenomenon.

Such a life, in its godless irregularity and recklessness, seems almost appalling—scarcely conceivable to many minds; yet it is strictly and literally the existence, the daily life led by many business girls. Not only that, but it is the best part, the happy part, the part which they enjoy, which I have briefly described. When the season is over and business becomes slack, then the "bad time" commences. What can a girl save out of nine, ten, twelve, or at the most fifteen shillings a week? Nor indeed, except in very rare cases, does she think of saving; if she can make both ends meet and keep up some sort of a respectable appearance, she is happy. She exists chiefly on stimulants of the vilest nature—trashy porter, weak ale at fourpence a quart, and adulterated poisonous gin. Her home is so miserable, so cheerless, that a saunter through the streets is infinitely preferable; she will pace up and down the Strand till she is weary rather than go home. When her own business fails, she takes a paper and sees what's doing. If she is a clever, pushing, fortunate girl, she may manage to exist during the slack months without pawning everything she possesses, but that is infrequent. She came to London hoping for "short hours"—she has them with a vengeance, and if she *will* have fine dresses they must of necessity be the wages of shame. Sin, misery, destruction are the too frequent result of the awful liberty, the terrible freedom, the young, inexperienced out-door business girl possesses. Literally *no one* cares for her. She arrives in London, and soon finds herself like a straw in the ocean—lost and helpless. She clings for guidance and comfort to the first person she happens to meet, and falls almost insensibly into the habits and manners of those she

associates with. She is isolated, no soul cares for her or about her. She has a latch-key, and comes home when she likes, or not at all, if it pleases her. So long as she pays her rent and does not "make a row," she is unmolested. When business is bad and she "feels jolly miserable," she must have "a drop of something to drink" to keep her from fainting, because she can't eat. Gin, being the cheapest, very soon becomes the favourite stimulant, and after a short time she finds it impossible to either eat or sleep without it.

In short, the use of stimulants is the curse of business girls. Utterly uncared for, worked hard, failing through ignorance, negligence, or hurry to have any breakfast, they are forced to seek artificial strength to sustain them, and the habit grows with fearful force and rapidity. Without either home, friends, or position, with no thought except self and how to make the most of the present moment, with twelve hours' work (frequently fourteen or fifteen when they take their work home), a cheerless home, and wretched remuneration, their existence is an unspeakably wretched one, even at the best; and it is not well to be too hasty in blaming them for adopting courses awful to contemplate, but to which they are very frequently driven by gaunt hunger and grim necessity. There is an internal misery, too deep for words, in their life—a misery little suspected by the outer world, and which no one can fully realise who has not lived amongst them and shared their trials.

That such a state of things is truly deplorable, and that something should be attempted to ameliorate the position of those unfortunate women, all thinking persons must admit. In no era of the world's history has the division of labour been carried to such an extent as at present, and in every department there are numbers of girls who earn their daily bread and exist in the manner I have attempted to describe: cuff and collar "hands," skirt, body, mantle "hands," milliners, "ladies' underclothing hands," straw hat makers, feather makers, flower mounters, umbrella hands, costumes, bonnet shapes, trimmings, braidings, paper box makers, tent makers, and a host of other crafts. The position of the majority of these girls and women is very wretched. They are a great fact, their necessity a fact, their condition a fact; and the thought naturally arises, cannot something be done for them? Cannot some of the civilisation and gigantic improvement of this nineteenth century be brought to bear upon their case? Homes there have been established from time to time, but in many instances they have entirely failed, in many been worse than useless, and in all cases utterly inadequate to the great want.

Perhaps the greatest drawback to homes or institutions intended for business girls, has been their mistaken *charity*. Independent young women have a dislike to be lodged or fed by the bounty of benevolent individuals, who feel they have a right to come and look at them at all times, and criticise their appearance and dress. Nor do they like to feel that because they get a room, or the share of a room, cheap, they are *compelled* to go to prayers night and morning, and attend Bible classes Sunday and week-day. An institution to be really appreciated by, and beneficial to, working women, should be absolutely self-supporting. Nor would I advocate founding an institution of any sort except on the grand religious principle which draws a clear and unmistakable line between right and wrong—which inculcates daily, by precept and example, the grand lessons of virtue and honour and truth and charity, and "Heaven's first law," order; the religion that teaches us to be scrupulous in the fulfilment of every social and moral duty; the religion which enables its followers to do justice and love mercy, and walk humbly with their God.

What I think is required is a large central home, which when once started should be absolutely self-supporting; in connection with which should be instituted a savings-bank, where every girl while working should be compelled to deposit a small weekly sum to maintain her while out of situation: an institution where the principal would be personally acquainted with every inmate, know her occupation, place of business, and who her friends were. It would be an undertaking requiring time, talent, patience, firmness, a keen insight into human nature, and some capital; but were it undertaken and carried out, the result would be glorious, and in the hands of a woman of integrity and common sense, and thorough business capacity, could be made entirely self-supporting.