

THE PHILOSOPHY OF STOCKING-DARNING.

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STOCKING - DARNING has both a science and a history. Of the science I shall not treat, because most darners believe that they have sufficient practical acquaintance with the art to serve their purpose. And employers of darners are more interested in the results than in the process; or, rather, it is the absence of result that chiefly concerns them.

For if the lords of the creation find a well-darned supply of hose to meet their oft-recurring needs, they accept it, like we accept too many of our common blessings, as a mere matter of course.

Nor shall I explore the history of darning, for its records are scanty, and we are not wholly past the Primitive Age, as the lone bachelor at the mercy of washerwomen can testify. And though the distance is very great between the coarse efforts he deplures, and the prize specimens shown to the School Board inspector, or the delicate repairs on a silken stocking that every lady can achieve, it is to be hoped that the art is still far from perfection, and that future generations may discover less tedious modes of darning the more durable stocking which I trust will fall to their lot.

There are other, more interesting aspects under which we may consider stocking-darning. It has been chosen as the type of minor domestic duties. If a lady, especially a married lady, takes an active interest in public affairs—if she speaks on a platform or agitates for votes—certain circles in society begin to talk darkly about “neglected stockings.” We must all of us, at one time or another, when women’s rights were discussed, have heard some impassioned orator hold up for scorn and ridicule “the woman who cannot boil a potato, or darn a stocking.”

If a woman, again, has a reputation for learning, slander asserts that her stockings are in holes. This is especially the case when she has the temerity to study any of the dead languages. No woman will do that, if she wishes to be thought a notable house-keeper. She may learn French, she may study music, or singing, or painting for years, with no serious result. But once let her begin Latin or Greek (one hardly dare mention Hebrew), and her competence to darn will be held in doubt. “Look to her stocking-heels,” is a Yorkshire proverb often quoted in this connection.

Nor can it be denied that there does exist, here and there, a Jellaby among women, just as every now and then one finds a man who has never shown himself capable of earning his daily bread. But the phenomenon is rare. Personally, I have never known any woman who was not alive to the importance of ordinary domestic duties, and I trust I never shall.

It is often said in disparagement of women that they have not originated or invented much. They have not; but it is their devotion to the minor details of life which has set men free to distinguish themselves,

and in all men’s achievements women have an unacknowledged part.

Home, especially the English home, has inspired volumes of poetry and floods of oratory. It is a subject on which we can all speak from the heart. But when we come to consider any one home in particular, we soon realise how entirely its essential character, its home-likeness, depends on the details of comfort supplied by the women who care for it. The family sense of well-being does not consist in the romantic surroundings, or architectural beauty, or artistic furnishing of a house, so much as in the cleanliness, the order, the serving of the meals, the homely work—in fact, the stocking-darning of the establishment. It is impossible to conceive of *perfect* family love permitting a state of perpetual discomfort, or of mutual affection remaining unruffled and undiminished amid the friction which such a state would occasion. That home only can be serenely happy where the daily homely duties are well done—not intermittently, not in a whirlwind of bewildering activity that scares the male population from the scene, but—I need not say how; I appeal to the inner consciousness of woman. What dignity, what beauty and delight it gives our humblest work to think of it as essential to the peace and comfort of English homes, and as enabling those to labour undisturbed who win our bread, and create our literature, and rule and teach our people!

And verily women need some such consolation. Consider how much of their work perishes in the day that it is done, and has all to be repeated day after day, and then say whether it is matter for great marvel that some of them have been ill-advised enough to talk occasionally about their “narrow sphere.” The changes are rung on washing, and ironing, and cleaning, and mending days, while every morning the same familiar objects demand washing or dusting, that have been washed or dusted thousands of times before. Tangible results are not what woman chiefly accomplishes, and she often works long and hard without having “anything to show” in the end. There is poetry in her life, it is true, but there is an enormous amount of prose. And sometimes I wish, when a man expresses horror at some woman’s escaping from her house-work to a wider field of action, that he would try a long-continued course of dusting, washing up, and mending stockings, and see if he ever found it at all monotonous.

But the consolation of affording leisure to the great, and comfort to all, is by no means a woman’s chief inspiration. There is another she loves and longs for—one she ought always to have, yet often lacks. It is appreciation. The drudgery of household life is glorified by the love that fulfils it for the sake of the love that receives and rewards it. And the mistress who passes over her servants’ faithful work in silence, only speaking of the neglected duties; the children who are slow to see where their comfort is studied, and quick to complain if their least exaction is not

satisfied; the husbands, sons, and brothers that take all service as their due, and make capital out of a small omission; the being, whoever he or she may be, whose only evidence of being satisfied is the negative one of *not* complaining, deserves a life of unmitigated stocking-darning. There are too many people who, like the kitten in Mrs. Gatty's Parable, never "purr when they are pleased." The reader will remember how this misguided kitten gave so much dissatisfaction, and missed so much comfort out of life, that at last he strove to conquer his reticence. He choked a little to begin with, but was finally rewarded by a permanently brightened existence. To receive kindness with grace, is an art that needs and repays cultivation.

It must be borne in mind, however, that we all, though working cheerfully for the most appreciative of mankind, shall yet do much work for which no one is ever the wiser. Stocking-darning is a fit emblem of obscure work. It is tedious, it is slow, it is not showy, and thus it becomes a test of conscientiousness. If there is a great heap of stockings, and if they are to go on heedless feet, how great the temptation to cobble! What patience, what principle is required to produce regular, even darns! How true a picture this is of much of our daily work; of the tiresome job that could so easily be scamped, and no one apparently be the worse for it! But second thoughts come to the rescue, and we know that our work, though done in solitude, and hidden in corners, will harm at least ourselves if not faithfully performed. If any one allows

himself to bungle the work that does not show, and only takes pains with that for which he can get credit, alas for the work and the workman too! Alas for his self-respect! Alas for the canker that has begun to eat into his life!

But this point needs guarding. There is a difference between honest work and *fadding*, and there is such a thing as going on after we have done. There is a stage in the history of every stocking when further labour spent on it is wasted; and it needs judgment to strike the balance aright between economy of stocking and economy of time. Women are peculiarly liable to spend over-much strength and sweetness in fads. Housekeeping possesses a potent spell that has sometimes charmed them into living more for their furniture than for their families; into taking unto themselves more and yet more goods to protect, dust, and arrange, till life becomes one mere round of house-keeping; as if houses were more than souls, and furniture than hearts. Too much stocking-darning is a more common evil than too little, and while proper attention to it, with all it represents, is as essential to most women's lives as having dinner and tea, on the other hand, if it is not kept in its proper place—if she allows herself to be always talking and thinking darning, so that the magic beauty of spring only inspires her with the desire to "clean down," and the glory of autumn suggests nothing more than winter jackets and petticoats—she will become more and more uninteresting to herself and every one else.

THE BODLEIAN LIBRARY AT OXFORD.



TENTH in size among the libraries of the world, second in importance among those of English-speaking people, and first of the institutions of the University of Oxford, ranks the library founded by that true worthy of Devon, Sir Thomas Bodley. And not only from its size and importance, but also for its varied annals and its venerable

and striking buildings, it is well worthy of our consideration in some detail,* so far as our brief space will allow. It was, moreover, the first public library in Europe, and the one great English repository of books and manuscripts for the century and a half which preceded the formation of the British Museum, and has thereby not ill deserved the title often given to it by enthusiasts of the seventeenth century, the "English Vatican." But its very magnitude will make necessary some order in description: let us take then in turn the buildings, the growth and present state, and (at more length) some curiosities of the library.

Few, if any, who have ever been members of the University, are ignorant of the Quadrangle of the Schools—that scene of inevitable anxiety and uncertain issues, where, as it has been said, every form of examination which a man can undergo has been tried, except the *post-mortem*. And, though the Bodleian has ousted examiners and examinees, yet, for one who stands beneath the Tower of the Five Orders and looks westward across the Quadrangle, the whole system of mediæval education is still spread before him, if he sees the significance of the old inscriptions above the doors, as they lead up through the thirteen-fold † groundwork of the Arts course to the higher faculties of Law and Medicine, and, in the central and most conspicuous place in front, Theology. Over one entry, in the south-west corner, we read the label "Bibliotheca Bodleiana, Schola vetus Medicinæ." Let us ascend the stairs worn by the feet of Selden and Casaubon and other heroes of learning, and enter the "Arts end" of the reading-room, which occupies the west side of the Quadrangle; turn to the left

* Our readers may be referred for full particulars to the Rev. W. D. Macray's "Annals of the Bodleian Library," Lond., 1868, of which a second edition is in preparation.

† The Trivium (Grammar, Logic, Rhetoric); the Quadrivium (Music, Arithmetic, Geometry, Astronomy); the two tongues (Hebrew and Greek, for every one knew Latin!); the three philosophies (Natural, Moral, and Metaphysical); and History.