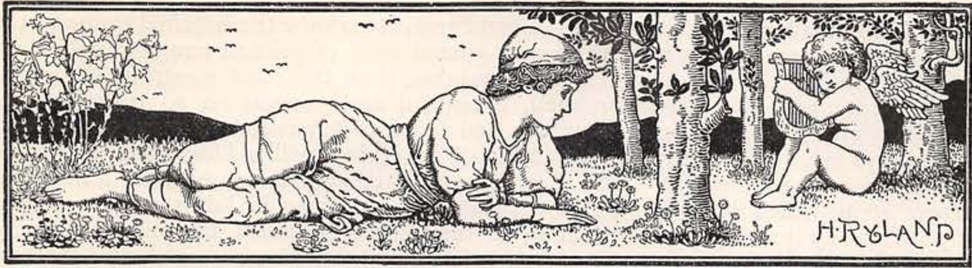
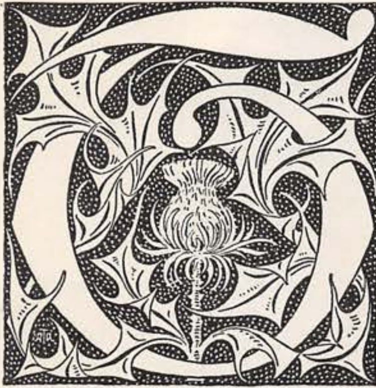


MATCH-BOX MAKING AT HOME.

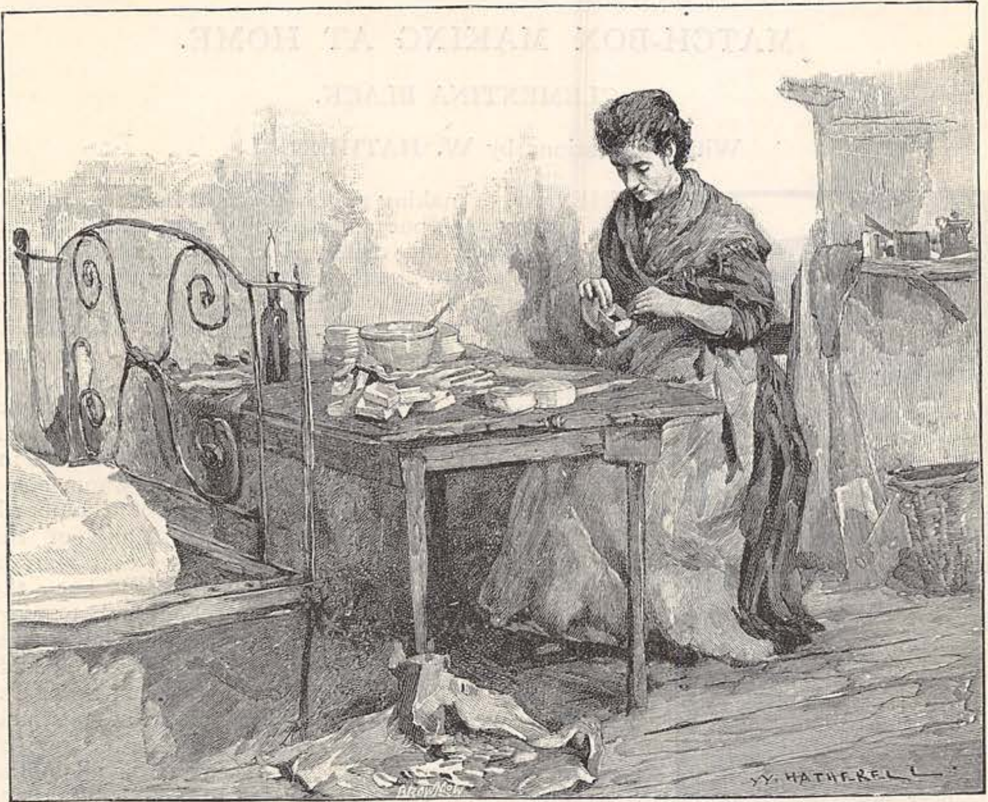
By CLEMENTINA BLACK.

With Illustrations by W. HATHERELL.



HE trade of making match-boxes at home is, I trust, a dying one; but as, alas, there are still hundreds of women and children engaged in this occupation, I should like to tell the readers of the *English Illustrated Magazine* a little about the hardships connected with the work. A couple of years or so back there was quite a nest of match-box makers in the "Old Nichol Street" district, close to Shoreditch Church. This little patch of slums had the character of being as poor, as vicious, and as unsanitary as any in London. It was once inhabited by French silk weavers, of whom some memory still lingers in the names of Chambord, Fournier, and Tourville Streets. Many of the houses have the wide upper windows that marked the dwelling of the hand-weaver; but the present inhabitants generally stuff up these windows or nail boards over part of them, for the English poor have no preference for light and air. The district is melancholy enough, but not so frightfully depressing as many little sordid, modern, East-End streets, in which may be found another colony of box-makers. These houses had "seen better days;" there had been good work in them once, and the lines of their original design were not quite so ugly as those of the newer sort of "small tenements." In these streets live numbers of home workers, all in the deepest poverty. Report attributes a very bad character indeed to the inhabitants of this square quarter of a mile; but personally I met with nothing to confirm it in the two visits of several hours which I made, and I have known highly respectable working women who have lived for years in this area, and were very unwilling to move. All the women admitted me readily, showed me their work, and answered my questions fully, civilly, and almost eagerly; and not one of them begged. Thousands of match-boxes pass in, unmade, every week to little streets in Bethnal Green and Shoreditch, and pass out again, completed. The women fetch out from the factory, or the middle-woman's, strips of notched wood, packets of coloured paper and sand paper, and printed wrappers; they carry back large, but light bundles of boxes, tied up in packets of two dozen. Inside their rooms the boxes, made and unmade, and half made, cover the floor, and fill up the lack of furniture. I have seen a room containing only an old bedstead in the very last stage of dirt and dilapidation, a table, and two deal boxes for seats. The floor and the window-sill were rosy with magenta match-boxes, while everything else, including the boards of the floor, the woodwork of the room and the coverings of the bed, was of the dark grey of ingrained dust and dirt. But the woman who lived here was quite cheerful; it was a sunny day, and her boxes could be dried without need of a fire. She worked while she talked, as such women always do, and indeed must do. At first sight, it is a pretty enough spectacle to see

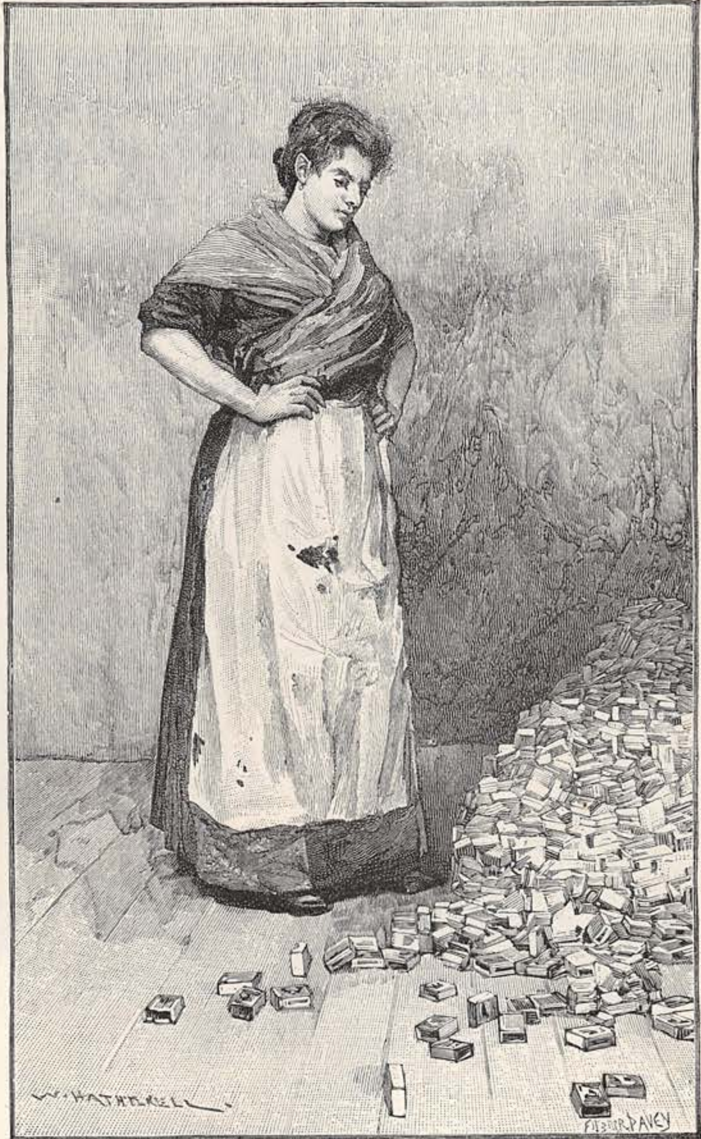
a match-box made; one motion of the hand bends into shape the notched frame of the case, another surrounds it with the ready-pasted strip of printed wrapper, which by long practice is fitted instantly without a wrinkle, then the sand paper or the phosphorus paper, pasted ready beforehand, is applied and pressed on so that it sticks fast. A pretty high average of neatness and finish is demanded by most employers, and readers who will pass their match-boxes in review will seldom find a wrinkle or a loose corner of paper. The finished case is thrown upon the floor; the long narrow strip which is to form the frame of the drawer is laid upon the bright strip of ready pasted paper, then bent together and joined by an overlapping bit of the paper; the edges of paper below are bent flat, the ready cut bottom is dropped in and pressed down, and before the fingers are withdrawn they fold



A MATCH-BOX MAKER AT WORK.

down the upper edges of the paper inside the top. Now the drawer, too, is finished and cast on the floor to dry. All this, besides the preliminary pasting of wrapper, coloured paper and sand paper, had to be done 144 times for $2\frac{1}{4}$*d.*—and even this is not all, for every drawer and case has to be fitted together and the packets tied up with hemp. Nor is the work done then, for paste has to be made before it can be used, and boxes when they are ready have to be carried to the factory. Let any reader, however deft, however nimble-fingered, consider how many hundred times in a day he or she could manage to perform all these minute operations. But practice gives speed, especially when stimulated by the risk of starvation. The real rate of pay for any work must be determined not by the price per piece as it seems to the outsider, but by the number of pieces that can be turned out by a skilled hand in an hour or a day; and this is a point difficult to arrive at, because most home workers work irregular hours and more or less intermittently. A married woman with children will tell you that she works from six o'clock till midnight, but when you come to examine more closely you find that out of that time some is employed in clothing and feeding the children. On the other hand it is more than likely that the children help in the work. It is not possible to measure the pay of such a woman. Another difficulty is

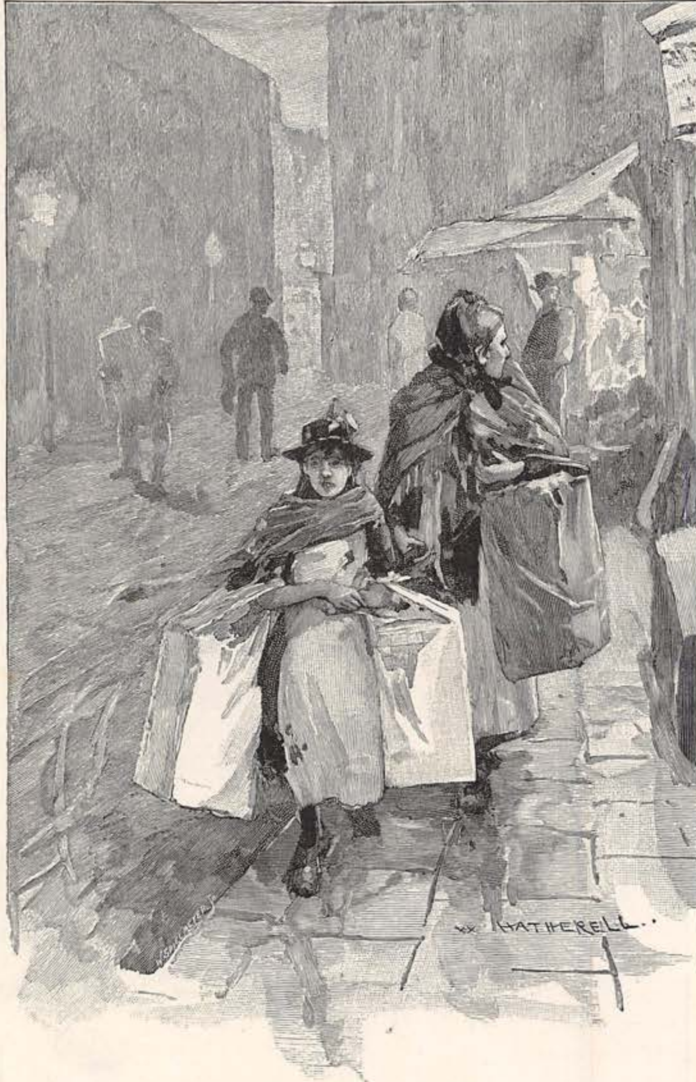
that many women have no clear idea how many gross they make in a day, or how much money they take in a week. It is evident that only in the case of a single woman working at the trade as a trade, not as a supplement, can the true figures be arrived at. I had been told that some girls were for a little time on show at the People's Palace, making match boxes in the presence of the public, and that they made at a rate of twelve gross a day. Allowing *2d.* per day for necessary deductions for fire, paste, and hemp, this gives *12s. 6d.* a week—a poor pittance enough, but considerably above the wage earned by hundreds of girls in East-End factories at jam-making, sweet-making, tailoring or rope-making. I think we may fairly assume that these girls chosen for exhibition were the quickest hands that could be found; and that they worked straight on without interruption. We may also assume that if they had been working at home they would have worked at least a part of the seventh day also. My own observations, however, led me to think that few match-box makers do, in actual fact, make much more than six gross a day, and after many visits and inquiries I came upon a young woman who had been asked by her employer to be one of those who worked for show at the People's Palace, and who therefore might be taken to be one of his quickest hands. This young woman was single, lived alone, and supported herself by her trade; she had begun it as a child and had never, she said, worked at anything else. She appeared to be about five-and-twenty. Here at last was a chance of getting something clear as to the highest average of wages actually earned.



A GOOD DAY'S WORK.

I ascertained that she was never kept waiting for her work at the factory, which was about a quarter of an hour's walk from where she lived, and that she worked regular hours from five in the morning to nine at night, taking out only just time enough to get her meals. I sat with this girl for some time, watching her work, and concluded that she was far the quickest worker of the thirty or forty different match-box makers whom I had seen at work. She told me that she made eight gross a day, and said it with some pride. I asked whether it could be true that

the girls on exhibition made twelve; she said that she thought it might be, because their materials would be laid ready for them, their paste probably made, and they would most likely not have to put together the drawer and case, and would certainly not have to fetch and take back their work at the factory. Then as I sat, still watching her quick fingers, I began to calculate. Eight gross at $2\frac{1}{4}$*d.*; 1*s.* 6*d.* per day, minus about $2\frac{1}{2}$*d.* for paste, hemp and firing; 1*s.* $3\frac{1}{2}$*d.* per day. How many hours of work? Five o'clock to nine o'clock; sixteen hours, from which an hour perhaps might be deducted for meals; another half hour would be taken up in going to the factory, but that must be reckoned as part of her working day. 1*s.* $3\frac{1}{2}$*d.* for fifteen hours. And this for an exceptionally quick hand, able to get as much work as she could do, and never kept waiting! It is clear enough that if this was about the best pay earned (and I think that those who best know the women working in this trade would confirm my opinion that it was) the ordinary rank and file of match-box makers cannot, at a rate of $2\frac{1}{4}$ per gross, be earning above $\frac{3}{4}$*d.* an hour.



TAKING THE BOXES TO THE FACTORY.

A worker who makes match-boxes by hand inside the factory has not to provide the fire for drying, the hemp for tying or the paste. Nor has she in any instance, I believe, to do the "boxing up," that is, to slide the drawer into its case. She would work probably fifty-six hours a week; and is paid $2\frac{1}{2}$*d.* instead of $2\frac{1}{4}$*d.* per gross. A girl as quick as she whom I have quoted above, would probably under these circumstances make a gross per hour, and would then—supposing she were never kept waiting for work—earn 11*s.* 7*d.* per week. Of course, very few workers do, as a matter of fact, work so quickly, and I have never, myself, known an instance of a factory worker of this kind whose weekly wage averaged 11*s.*

The machines for match-box making are as yet not widely used, and I have never had an opportunity of seeing one at work, or learning what, exactly, is their output. To be made by machine is no doubt the ultimate destiny of match boxes; but it does not seem to be approaching very rapidly.

This state of things had long existed in the poorer parts of London, and was

known vaguely but discomfortingly to the buyers and users of matches and their boxes. The factory workers in many instances belonged to the Union of Women employed in match-making, which arose at the time of the match girls' strike in July 1888; while the home workers were quite unorganized. In July 1891 an effort was made to organize the home workers and mainly through the exertions of Miss Jessie Thomson such a Union was formed, and by appealing to the employers obtained an advance of a farthing per gross from a considerable number of firms and of middlemen. A similar attempt has been made in Bethnal Green under the auspices of the Women's Trade Union League, and this branch still subsists, while the original branch has lately ceased to be. I fear that no union can be effective in the main purpose of gaining better payment which does not include in one organization the boxmakers working in factories and the boxmakers working in their own homes. While they remain separated, each set of workers is competing with the other, and any demand for an advance on the part of one section will only result in throwing the work into the hands of the other. In the interest of the workers generally it is much to be desired that the industry should be transferred—as it must sooner or later be—to the factory "hand," who even now, in spite of the competition from without, earns as much or more per gross as the home worker, while she does less work to each gross and is free from the deductions necessitated by home work. The home worker is driven by poverty not only to work, in her own expressive phrase, "all the hours that God sends her," but also, as far as she can, to keep her children working with her. Home work involves child-work; and without child-work it could not be so ill paid as it is. It offers a direct incentive to parents to keep their children from school; it wastes time, labour and money; time and labour in carrying to and fro, in "boxing up"—for every box must be reopened to put in the matches—and in tying up the parcels; time and money in the purchase of hemp and the provision of innumerable separate fires and boilings of paste. Finally, it does not provide a wage at which a woman can house, clothe, and feed herself healthily—to say nothing of comfort. Such a form of work cannot survive—and the sooner it dies the better. Meanwhile are there any ways by which match-box makers might be better paid?

There is, of course, one simple way. Those who receive the profits of the industry might sacrifice a portion of their profits in order to pay these women better. Again, a strong trade union could probably remedy the low wages; but the difficulties in the way of forming such a union are very great indeed. But even without the development either of a new spirit of commercial chivalry among shareholders, or of a power of combination among the poorest workers, I think that the match-box maker might be better paid if the public really cared about it. A gentleman wrote to the press some time back urging the formation of a league to buy only English-made matches. His letter was the outcome of a widely felt uneasiness of conscience in this matter of cheap buying.

The directors of the Salvation Army, with their usual keen eye to the business possibilities as well as the religious possibilities of their undertakings, perceived this attitude of the public mind, and established a match-making factory with the avowed object of paying better prices to the boxmakers. Fourpence a gross was to be paid, but 3½*d.* is what has come actually to be paid, the matches being sold at the same price as those for which 2½*d.* or 2¼*d.* are given. Of course 3½*d.* is better than 2¼*d.*, but I cannot help thinking that there is still room for some shrewd philanthropist to "go one better" without losing money. If any employer were to pay 4½*d.* a gross for his match-boxes from the first of next month—having all his boxes made in a factory—to advertise widely the fact that he did so and invite investigation to prove it, I believe that a vast number of purchasers would refuse to buy the matches of any other maker, English or foreign, and would gladly pay double the price that they now pay for every box of matches. Ten years ago, even two years ago, public feeling was not much aroused on these matters, and any such employer would probably have seen his trade go away from him; but nowadays we are all uneasy in our consciences and should be glad to salve the uncomfortable sensation by paying even as much as a 1*d.* apiece for our boxes of safety matches. The enterprising trader has not yet begun to see what the new wave of public opinion means; and there is a fine opening for the first two or three who perceive that the advertisement of the future will run, not "Lowest prices in the trade," but "Highest wages in the trade."