

# HOW THE OTHER HALF THE LIVES

DRESSMAKERS APPRENTICE

By  
Elizabeth L. Banks.

WHEN Madame Smartly, fashionable modiste, advertised in the morning paper for "first-class bodice hands; also apprentices," it occurred to me that here might be an opportunity for me to start on a career as a needlewoman. My early education in the distinctly feminine accomplishment of sewing had been sadly neglected, and I had grown to woman's estate without being able to handle a needle properly. So when I called upon Madame Smartly to offer her my services, I did not think it politic to attempt to pass myself off as a "first-class bodice hand," but instead, I requested to be allowed to enter her establishment in the humble capacity of apprentice. At first the lady looked upon me with a certain degree of suspicion. She said she was accustomed to take only very young girls as apprentices. They usually came to her at the age of fourteen, just after leaving the Board School. It took all my cajoling and argumentative powers to convince her that it would really be to her advantage to give the preference to a person who had attained to years of discretion. She finally laid aside her prejudices and expressed herself as pleased with the fact that I was willing to "give time" for any number of months or even years in order that I might gain a knowledge of the dressmaking business. She doubtless thought that a young woman to whom

time was no object might really prove to be a valuable acquisition, so at the end of half-an-hour's interview I was engaged, and agreed to make my first appearance the next morning at half-past eight, the hour at which she informed me the working day commenced. I was told that the girls' entrance was by the basement door, that I was to carry my dinner with me, as only half an hour was allowed for dining, but that Madame Smartly herself supplied the girls with afternoon tea. I was to leave my wraps in the hanging cupboard off the kitchen, after which I would ascend to the work-rooms on the third floor and inquire for Miss Fitley, the forewoman, who was to initiate me into my duties as apprentice.

When I arrived the next morning only a few of the girls had assembled, it being a few minutes before the time for commencing work. The atmosphere of the basement was not remarkably cheerful. The front and back kitchens were separated from each other by an archway, and although there were two grates, no fires brightened the hearths. The floors were of stone, and as I walked over to the hanging cupboard, the heavy boots I wore made a loud clatter beneath me. The girls soon began to arrive by twos and threes until there were about twenty-five of them. In age they ranged from fourteen to thirty, and in looks they represented the distinctly pretty, the passably attractive, and the absolutely ugly. I was quick to note that they paid considerable attention to the matter of personal adornment, and I reflected that I need not have taken such pains to array myself modestly and plainly for fear of dressing better than my companions. My unpretending hat, coat, and black gown were entirely





THE GIRLS SOON BEGAN TO ARRIVE.



eclipsed by the flowers, feathers, furs, and bead-trimmed frocks worn by the other girls. I had combed my hair back into a homely knot, and my "fringe" drooped straight and disconsolate; but the various fringes of my comrades were curled ever so tightly, and every girl's back hair was done up in a "bun," set off by a black or gay ribbon bow.

A red-haired young woman, with blue eyes and large freckles, made her way over to me to inquire if I was one of the new bodice hands, and she expressed surprise when I informed her that I was only an apprentice.

As the single stroke of the kitchen clock proclaimed the time for going to the work-room, I followed the other girls up several flights of stone stairs, and was conducted to one of the bodice-rooms. Seven or eight girls took their places about a long table in the centre of the room. The forewoman in charge had a table to herself near one of the windows. She was rather an attractive young woman, not over twenty-two; though notwithstanding her youth, I noticed that there was a network of horizontal and perpendicular lines on her forehead, which I felt sure must be the result of frowning. She had a good figure, was tall and stately, and her black silk dress fitted her to perfection. I asked the girl who sat next to me whether the silk dress was Miss Fitley's own personal property, and was informed that it was lent to her by Madame Smartly, who desired that her forewoman should make a good appearance in the "trying-on room."

Miss Fitley came over to me, and with elevated eyebrows inquired my name.

"Lizzie Blake," I answered.

"Very well, Miss Blake," she returned, "you may overhand this bodice. Take number forty black."

She handed me a black bodice with a checked lining, and left me in a quandary as to just what "number forty black" could mean. She had taken it for granted that I knew the stock expressions of the trade. Before I had time to display my ignorance my neighbour handed me a reel of black cotton, on which I saw the number forty, and then I congratulated myself that I had solved the mystery of "number forty black."

My knowledge of overhanding was very limited indeed; but by dint of watching the girl who sat next to me and closely examining two seams of the bodice which had been finished off, I managed to worry through a seam, and nudging the girl who

had come to my rescue in the matter of the cotton, I asked—

"Do you think that will do?"

"No; the stitches are too big," she answered. I ripped it out and started again, bravely and confidently. I pricked my fingers, broke two needles, still I was not discouraged, and after an hour's hard labour I came to the end of the seam. Then I felt it incumbent upon me to take a rest before starting on a second seam.

"What's your name?" asked my neighbour of me in an undertone. I had observed that all conversation among the workers was carried on in whispers, so I answered under my breath that I bore the name of Blake, requesting her name in return.

"Miss Wesley," was her whispered reply.

"You're so little and so young I should think you'd go by your Christian name," I ventured to remark. She straightened herself with dignity as she answered—

"No indeed! We're never called anything but 'Miss' here. I'm not fifteen yet, but I suppose I'll work here a good many years; and I wouldn't like to be known by my Christian name, or they'd keep it up when I'm a young lady."

"How much money do you earn, Miss Wesley?" was my next question.

"A half-crown a week. I'm only a month out of my apprenticeship," she returned.

When I told her that I was to "give time" for the next several months she looked at me in a superior sort of way and told me she only expected to work six months at her present rate of wages. After that they were to be increased to five shillings a week.

Then I started on the second seam, and just as I had begun to feel a special pride and interest in my work the voice of Miss Fitley fell upon my ear.

"Miss Blake," she exclaimed impatiently, "I wish you would sit up straight on your chair. You irritate me. You must remember you're not at home. This is a work-room!"

It is needless to relate that for the rest of the day I made every effort to please the forewoman in regard to my position on my chair. I was glad when at one o'clock Miss Wesley informed me that it was time to go to the basement for dinner. Thimbles, needles, and white aprons were laid hurriedly aside, and there was a stampede down the stone stairs. The twenty-five girls scrambled for seats at the long tables



in the front kitchen. The tables were covered with oil-cloth, and in the middle of each there was a steaming pot of tea, surrounded by four huge plates of buttered bread. There was little ceremony about that meal. The cups and saucers had been heaped one upon the other until they threatened to collapse, and each girl grabbed one as though in terror there would not be a sufficient number to go around. Then the teapot was attacked. This was worked with a faucet, which was kept in constant motion by the impatient girls, who fairly tumbled over one another in their ambitious efforts to fill their cups. My own cup was the last to be filled, for, not being accustomed to regard the dinner-hour as a time for battle-field manœuvres, I did not join in the general assault. I was surprised to find that the table manners of these young women were in no way superior to those of servant-girls, laundry-girls, and girls in other so-called "lower" occupations with whom I had come into contact. Many of them drank from their saucers, chewed their food with their lips smacking and mouths partly open, used their sleeves for napkins, and had no scruples against making use of the one general spoon which was supplied for stirring and tasting eight or ten cups of tea. The manners of the prettiest and best-dressed girls were even worse than those of the others. The majority of the workers had carried their dinners, which were necessarily cold, in bags, boxes, and baskets. There were a few, however, who, living in the neighbourhood of the place, had hot dinners brought to them by their little brothers and sisters, and they were greatly envied by the girls who lived at a distance. Before I started out in the morning I had filled my own basket with a goodly supply of bread, meat, cheese, and mince-pies. I found I was not able to eat all the contents, so I offered one of my pies to a girl who sat near me. She accepted it with gratitude, and begged me to share her cold kidney stew. This I felt under the necessity of declining; but we soon became rather friendly. The girl was a Miss Jansen, from the skirt-room. She also expressed surprise to find that I was only a learner.

"You'll have a long time to work before you earn money enough to live on," she said. "I've been here two years, and I only earn seven shillings a week; but, of course, they don't pay as much in the skirt-room as they do in the bodice-room."

"Can you live on seven shillings a week?" I asked.

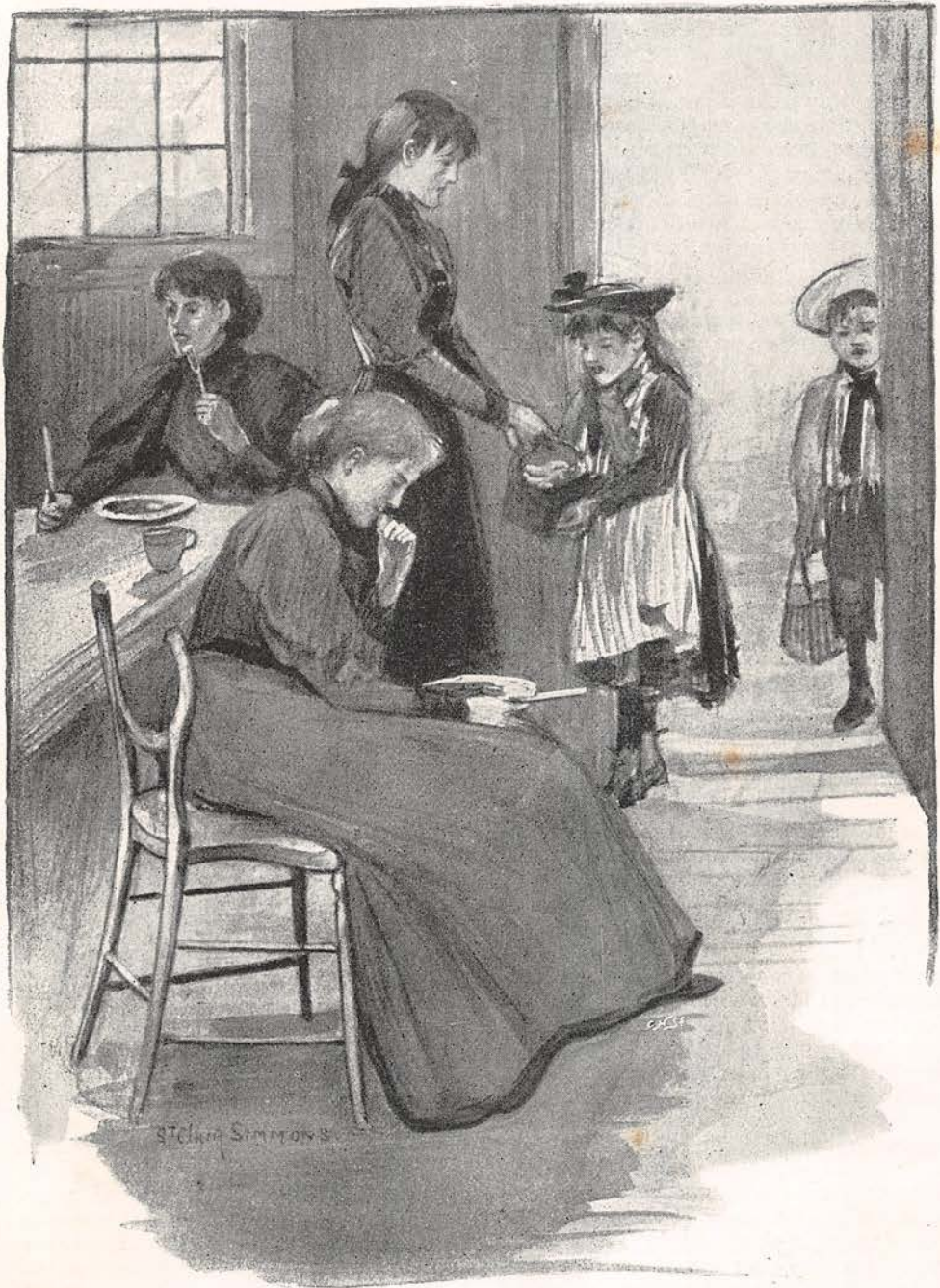
"Yes; but I would have a hard time to

manage it if I didn't live with my sister. I pay her four shillings a week, and the other three I spend on clothes. But there's Miss Appleton, at the other end of the table, who has to do everything on nine shillings a week. She and another girl live together in one room, and pay six shillings each for board and lodging, so you see she has three shillings left for clothes, the same as I do."

The next day Miss Jansen and I again entered into conversation concerning the way she and her companions managed to make both ends meet. The wages ranged all the way from five to fifteen shillings a week. The girls who lived at home usually handed over their wages to their mothers to be added to the general fund for supporting the whole family, but there were eight or ten girls who, having no homes, or preferring to live away from their relations, hired rooms in cheap lodging-house districts, bought their own food and cooked it over spirit-lamps, which were considered cheaper than coal fires. Some of them were able to earn a few shillings a week extra by making dresses for some of their friends who were engaged in other occupations. Miss Jansen herself spent her evenings in making servant-girls' dresses for five shillings apiece, and, by working until twelve o'clock at night, was able to turn out one dress in two weeks. All the girls, of course, made their own dresses, even to little Miss Wesley, who boasted that she had cut, fitted, and sewn the rather remarkable-looking garment she called her "work-dress." During the few spare minutes at dinner and tea time, the girls often helped each other in cutting out, fitting, and draping the materials which they brought with them when they came to work. If Miss Ellis of the skirt-room draped a skirt for Miss Atwood of the bodice-room, Miss Atwood returned the compliment by fitting, to the best of her ability, a bodice to the form of Miss Ellis.

In listening to the conversation of the girls on the subject of where and how their evenings were spent, I found that few of them went to bed before one o'clock in the morning. The evenings passed with sewing, visiting, attending dances and theatres, or walking out with their "young men." Except on days when overtime was required of them, they left the dressmaking shop at seven o'clock, so that between that hour and the time for commencing the next day's work they were comparatively free and independent. There was one young woman among





THERE WERE A FEW WHO HAD HOT DINNERS BROUGHT TO THEM.



them who seemed to enter little into the amusements of her companions. She was a Miss Arthur, a thin, pale-faced girl and head bodice hand in Miss Fitley's room. She was but twenty-one years old, though her careworn face gave her the appearance of being very much older. She had started as apprentice at the age of fourteen. Her wages had been advanced from year to year, until now she held what was looked upon as an enviable position at fourteen shillings a week. Miss Arthur was suffering from lung trouble, and I could not help wondering whether the disease was not due, in part at least, to the fact that she sewed all day sitting with her back to one of the work-room windows which Miss Fitley always insisted upon keeping open, even in the coldest weather. The forewoman was what would be termed in the American vernacular a "ventilation crank." The place would have been uncomfortably cold without the open windows, for no fires were allowed, although it was midwinter; but Miss Fitley was one of those persons who never feel the cold, and, having a predilection for "fresh air," she filled the room with draughts from the open windows, while the girls sat with cold feet, chilled backs, and fingers so numb that they could only with difficulty push the needle in and out. One of the most acute sufferers from the cold was poor little Miss Wesley, who often made a rather ludicrous appearance with her face swollen with toothache. She confidentially informed me that she thought she would not be troubled in this way if the room were comfortably heated and free from draughts. When I advised her to go to the dentist, she replied that only rich people could afford to have their teeth filled. I noticed that crooked and unsightly teeth were the rule among the girls employed at Madame Smartly's. With all the care they bestowed upon their fringes and back-hair nets there were apparently very few among them who made use of a toothbrush, and the idea of visiting a dentist never occurred to them unless it might be for the purpose of having their teeth extracted. This seems to be the state of things among English working girls of nearly every occupation. In America one of the first things that would impress a foreigner are the white, even teeth for which American women—working girls as well as the more well-to-do classes—are noted.

Towards the end of the week, when, in my own opinion at least, I had become something of an expert at overhanding, Miss Fitley informed me that I might

spend a few hours in practising the button-hole stitch. She handed me a bit of brown-and-red striped material in which she had cut a buttonhole, adding that she probably did not need to show me the stitch, as she supposed I had learned that at the Board School. This was the first intimation I had that buttonholing was taught in the English Board Schools, but I did not think it policy to disabuse Miss Fitley's mind of the impression that I had been educated at one of those noble British institutions, so I only said, "Yes, Ma'am," wondering how I was to manage to make stitches of which I was absolutely ignorant. However, fortune favoured me, as she usually favours the brave. To my joy I saw that Miss Arthur was making buttonholes in a serge bodice, and inventing an excuse to go to her for a larger needle, I watched her in the process until I felt able to manipulate my own needle and thread in the same way. For the rest of that day and the next and the next I practised the buttonhole stitch, always on pieces of brown-and-red striped linsey woolsey. At first I was fascinated with my new employment, but after a while the monotony of the thing began to affect my nerves. I found more difficulty in sitting still and straight in my chair than I had when I was engaged in overhanding. My St.-Vitus'-dance antics drew forth many a scowling reproof from Miss Fitley, who, one day when I was resting from my labours called out—

"Miss Blake, you must either sit up straight and work buttonholes or go home. Remember, 'practice makes perfect.' One of my rules is that an apprentice shall practice the buttonhole stitch two weeks before going on to other work, and you will have to obey that rule!"

This announcement struck terror to my heart.

"Miss Fitley," I said, "I don't think I'd mind the buttonholes so much if you'd be so kind as to give me another kind of cloth to practise on. Might I have a bit of blue cloth for the next buttonhole?"

But Miss Fitley only frowned more deeply than ever, declaring that she was not accustomed to being dictated to by her apprentices, and that as there happened to be a large number of brown and red striped bits about the place which she wanted used up, I would have to continue making buttonholes on linsey woolsey.

Try as I would I was unable to conceive any great affection for Miss Fitley. It seemed to me that she was lacking in



sympathy for backward beginners; however, I tried my best to show her the respect which I felt was due to her position, and my dislike for her did not prevent my appreciating her true worth. She was the only real genius in Madame Smartley's establishment. For her valuable services she received a wage of twenty-five shillings a week and dinner and tea "found." The

usually resulted in becoming gowns. Miss Fitley was ably assisted in her endeavours to provide suitable costumes by Miss Marguerite, the show-room girl, who, for looking pretty all day long and suggesting the proper style and colour of material to be used in making up, received a salary of fifteen shillings a week.

At the end of two weeks I resigned my



SHE HANDED ME A BIT OF BROWN-AND-RED STRIPED MATERIAL.

responsibility of the cut, fit, and style of all the bodices devolved entirely upon her. She decided the fate of many a fashionable lady who patronised Madame Smartly, and there were many society belles who had every reason to be grateful to Miss Fitley for her conscientiousness in providing them with bodices best suited for displaying their charms or hiding their defects. She made a study of each individual customer, and was always ready with advice and ideas, which, if followed out,

situation with shattered nerves, a sore throat, and a temper very much the worse for wear and tear. I felt sure that another week of buttonhole making on brown-and-red striped linsey woolsey would drive me into a lunatic asylum, and thus prevent my starting out in business for myself, should I later on desire to do so, in which case I have thought of putting up a sign to the effect that I am

MADAME BLAKE, Modiste,  
Late with Madame Smartly.