

GENTLEWOMEN AS DRESS-MAKERS.



AMONG the various employments whereby women of the present day may earn their livelihood, few persons appear to have thought of dressmaking—actual dressmaking, not plain sewing—as an occupation peculiarly suited to a gentlewoman. Before discussing the advantages or disadvantages of such a calling, it may be as well to state distinctly that by the word “dressmaking” I do not mean the kind of business carried on by West-end *modistes* with wonderful French names, who visit their customers in broughams, and whose charges range from 10 to 100 guineas for a single gown. To compete with such persons as these would require far more capital than is at the disposal of any gentlewoman who has to work for her own living.

Setting aside, then, these highly-fashionable people on the one hand and the village dressmaker (whose earnings are very small) on the other, let us consider for a moment the average middle-class dressmaker—the person who asks from 15s. to £2 for making an ordinary gown (including the little etceteras of lining, buttons, and such things), and who is usually, though not by any means always, kind enough to say that “ladies’ own materials will be made up.”

Now, whatever may be the good qualities of this estimable woman, all who have had practical experience of her work will, I believe, agree that the faculty of tastefully arranging a dress is not usually one of them; that the art of adjusting the folds of any material to the curves of the human figure is chiefly conspicuous by its absence, and that for her to send home a really well-fitting gown, made in strict accordance with the wishes of the lady who ordered it, is emphatically the exception rather than the rule.

On this last point I would lay particular stress. Among educated, cultivated women, there are many (and the number is increasing every day) who wish that their style of dress, without being painfully “aesthetic,” should express, to a certain extent, their own personality, and should harmonise with their surroundings. They feel as a real hardship the difficulty of finding a dressmaker able and willing to follow out their plans, and the possibility of employing a competent gentlewoman with taste and refinement equal to their own. One who could be trusted to carry out an original idea without vulgarising it, and who did not depend wholly on fashion-books for assistance, would be hailed as a blessing by hundreds of cultivated women to-morrow. Of course there will always be—at least, there will be for many years—a large class of persons perfectly content to appear as imitations, more or less (usually less) exact, of the last coloured fashion-plate. Their own eyes never having been trained to appreciate the beauty of symmetrical lines and harmonious colouring, they are not likely to feel the want of such appreciation on the part of those who work for them. Yet even these ladies are by no means insensible to the advantages of being well-dressed; and if they once saw the costumes made by a lady dressmaker to be a success,

they would probably be anxious to employ her.

Now, coming to the actual practical part of the subject—the matter of pounds, shillings and pence. What income might a well-qualified gentlewoman hope to earn as a dressmaker? In every case so much depends on individual ability, locality, old-established connexion, &c., that it is almost impossible to give a precise and definite answer to this question; but, after careful inquiries (made, I should perhaps say, in a large provincial town), I believe it would be fairly accurate to say that the average income of the “middle-class dressmaker” varies from about £200 to over £300 a year; clever and energetic women frequently earning more than the latter sum. Of course, it is not pretended that this is a large fortune, more especially when food and clothing, to say nothing of rent, taxes, &c., have to be paid out of it; but it is enough to live on—enough to make the worker independent at any rate, and, at a time when so many women have no one but themselves to depend on, that is worth thinking of. One point to be noticed here is that the dressmakers who make the most money are not always those whose charges are the highest. Unless there be a really marked difference in workmanship, the cheaper worker frequently succeeds in getting so much employment that she actually makes a larger income than her expensive rival, whose customers are few and far between. One reason for this is that a dressmaker whose services are in great request, can employ a large number of apprentices, and every apprentice means, not only an additional helper in the workroom, but an additional premium. In some cases young women prefer to “give their time,” *i.e.*, work for an extra six months or so without salary, instead of paying a round sum of money; but as a rule these “premiums” form a large item in the profits of every dressmaker, and when they are not paid the apprentice’s work must, of course, be considered as an equivalent.

To ensure (as far as foresight can ensure) to any gentlewoman a reasonable amount of success as a dressmaker, the observance of four conditions appears to be essential:—

1. She must be a really competent worker, able to fit different figures easily and well, and to send home a well-finished dress. To do this she must have had (say) six months’ training under a first-class private dressmaker or in a large fashionable shop.

2. She must have enough capital to supply her for a year or two until she gets sufficient employment to be independent.

3. She must be employed as a matter of business, not as a matter of charity.

4. She must not think that (to quote a recent writer on this subject) “she is conferring a favour on her employers by working for them at all,” but must attend to their wishes—to their fancies, even—and be prepared to give a day’s honest work for a day’s wage.

It may be noticed that nothing has yet been said of those business habits which are an indispensable condition of success in any undertaking: punctuality, order, method, accuracy—all these are invaluable qualities in a dressmaker, as in every other woman who has her own way to make in the world; but it is just because they are essential everywhere that they can hardly be reckoned among the conditions of success in any particular calling.

The question, too, of natural aptitude for needlework seems scarcely to need discussion here, for it is only reasonable to suppose that unless a lady had some real taste for such work she would not elect to make dresses for her livelihood, but would turn to some more congenial occupation. It is to those who have already some practical experience of the matter—such experience as they may have gained by making their own and their sisters’ gowns, for instance—and who are both able

and desirous to qualify themselves for something better than amateur work, that the possibility of undertaking dressmaking as a profession may be suggested. Their success could not be certain, for certainty attends no human effort; but it would be more than probable if, in addition to persistence and energy, they brought to bear on their work that instinctive refinement and purity of taste which I would fain believe to be the birthright of every English gentlewoman.

ELIZABETH S. LISLE.

ANSWERS TO CORRESPONDENTS.

EDUCATIONAL.

LADY EVELYN.—We fear you will not pass the Cambridge local examination for some time to come in composition, spelling, or what you call your “writing.” If your arithmetic be still more defective, we advise your improving yourself at home for the present.

IGNORAMUS.—You have only named three of our poets, and we have no idea what else you have read. Eadie’s “Bible Cyclopaedia” is most interesting and instructive, and is full of illustrations. It is to be had at 56, Paternoster-row, E.C. Are you well read in history, geography, and natural history? Procure the General Catalogue of the Religious Tract Society, and select one of these.

EXCELSIOR.—“The College of Preceptors,” 42, Queen-square, Bloomsbury, W.C., holds half-yearly “Pupils’ Examinations,” the certificates of which are recognised as guarantees of a good general education. The fee is ten shillings. Apply to the secretary for all further information. Your hand is good but peculiar.

SIBYL HAUGHTON.—If you wish to study Natural History, “The Home Naturalist,” by Harland Coultas (56, Paternoster-row), would suit you. Brush your teeth often with flowers of sulphur; keep them very clean, have all stopped that need it, and avoid eating sweet things that produce acidity.

AN IGNORANT GIRL.—We consider the “Handbook of the English Tongue,” by Angus, is a most admirable and exhaustive work, and you would do well to study it. Two hours of study weekly would be sufficient. In any case it might not be expedient to devote more time to it. We rejoice to hear of the good work accomplished by THE GIRL’S OWN PAPER amongst “the girls.”

QUEEN OF THE MAY.—Apply to Miss Winscom, Sandwell, Birmingham, School for girls under 18, at 23 and 25 guineas a term. Five open scholarships from £10 to £50, and exhibitions for the daughters of gentlemen and clergymen, from £25 to 50 guineas. The school is connected with the college at Sandwell. There is a girls’ college at Huddersfield, the fees for which are from 4 guineas to 10, and the year is divided into four quarters. For information respecting this training school write to Miss Cheveley.

TYRO.—An hour’s practice daily would be quite sufficient if you keep time very carefully and have an ear and taste for music. Your composition is defective. You cannot change from the first to the third person in one letter; you should keep to one person throughout. Write copies. You make three “u’s” instead of two “m’s” in the word “grammar.” We thank you for all your kind and good wishes.

WORK.

IVY and MINOLA GREY.—We are grieved to hear that you have been so unfortunate as to receive no answers to your letters, but we are comforted in the thought that you did not need them to help you to be charitable and kind. We think that you and your friends would enjoy helping Mrs. Hilton’s *Crèche*. They need clothes for the little ones there very much. Write for the “*Crèche Annual*,” enclosing a stamp to Mrs. Hilton, Stepey-causeway, Commercial-road, E. Any clothes, as well as boots and shoes, are welcomed. Ivy’s writing is not pretty, but might be made so with more care.

T. B. O. P.—We did not acknowledge the arrival of any of the shawls or bags by post, as it would have entailed too much labour. You have seen the result of the competitions by this time. We do not answer privately.

QUEEN BRYNHILD.—Thank you for your pleasant letter, and the recipe.

K. E. H.—Take the collar apart, wash the lace, and make it up again. Perhaps if you sent it to a cleaner he would wash all together.

GLOIRE DE DIJON.—Inquire of a chemist.

E. D. B. (Lewisham) only.—We thank you for your appreciation of our Needlework Competition, and have laid by your letter to consider its suggestion.

APPLE BLOSSOM.—1. Some description of brown “Pompadour” material would suit your peacock-blue dress as a trimming when turned. 2. “*Je vous adore*” is the French for “I adore you.” Silver may always be gilt, but it will need repetition after a while.