

BY SUSAN COUNTESS OF MALMESBURY.

(ILLUSTRATED WITH PHOTOGRAPHS BY ELLIOTT AND FRY, BAKER STREET.)

THE Royal Army Clothing Department is one of those establishments which minister to the wants of our soldiers. It is presided over by a director, and forms one of the heavy branches placed under the Director-General of Ordnance. Its buildings and stores are situated in Grosvenor Road, Pimlico, where it employs about three thousand two hundred persons.

In visiting the factory one becomes impressed with the vast amount of quiet, steady work which is now being done, and has been carried on for many years past, generally without undue haste, always without rest, fuss, or advertisement, and with an ever-improving organisation. It is managed by men who have given their lives and the best part of their intellect and energy to the work; but their names are little known to the outside world, and they have been satisfied to reap the reward of their services in the appreciation of that small portion of the public which interests itself in such matters in times of peace. These have been ours for so long that few remember what war really means, for, although this is an Empire in which the gates of the Temple of Janus stand always ajar, yet never have we been called upon to make such an effort as now. The stress is great—more severe, say those few amongst us who remember, than during the Crimea and the Indian Mutiny, and each department of the War Office feels the strain of the situation.

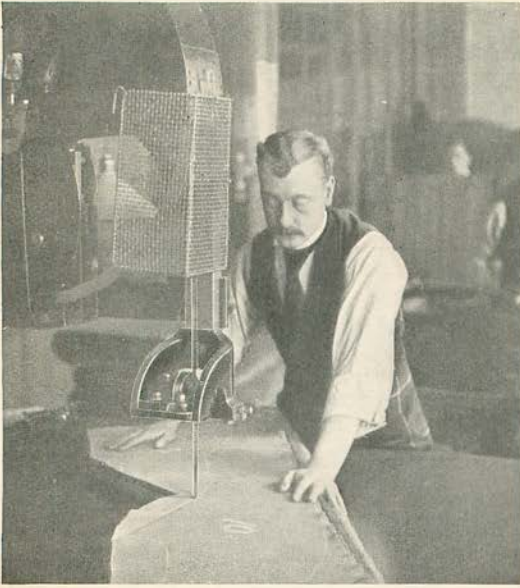
Owing to the fact that clothing deteriorates if kept long in store, the Grosvenor Road establishment has been obliged very largely to increase its weekly output by taking on extra hands and working overtime. It should

be understood that even in normal times only a small proportion of the clothing for the Army is made in the factory, which is chiefly used for special work and to fill up gaps on an emergency, or in answer to a sudden imperious call like the present.

It may surprise some of my readers to learn that many of the uniforms worn by our soldiers, and probably some of those of their officers as well, are made by women, with the assistance of men only in the heavy work of cutting out and of packing. In all of these operations both men and women are largely assisted by machinery.

The department consists of three divisions—inspection, factory, and store, which latter includes packing and the despatch of the finished goods to their destination. The factory consists of a large central hall, surrounded by two storeys of galleries, where manufacturing and certain portions of the “viewing,” or inspection, are carried on. The ground floor of the hall is occupied by tables, at each of which from ten to twelve women are seated, there being one machinist to two tables. The machinists are more or less set over the tables, but each woman is responsible for her own work, to which her work number is attached before it is handed to the “viewers.” This latter official is a man, and is placed in authority over about two hundred women. His duty is to see that the measurements are correct and that the work is properly done.

The average number of garments made is about seven per week to each individual, except where there is a great deal of gold lace or braiding, in which case two would be a fair



CUTTING OUT.

amount to get through in that time. Much depends on the quickness of the sewer and the class of garment—trousers, for instance, average weekly from fifteen to thirty pairs; frocks of sorts, seven to ten; tunics of sorts, three to six. Staff, band, or braided clothing is only made by the most skilled workers. As an example, a bandmaster's tunic for the Royal Artillery would take about six days to make. Most of the machines are driven by power, which is a great relief and improvement upon the old system of the treadle.

In the galleries above sit the button- and eyelet-hole makers, with their special machines, and the men who work and cut out are by themselves at one end. Here are also the "staff-workers," who make the more elaborate and expensive uniforms, while down below we saw the tunics and frocks, which require less skill to manipulate.

On the top storey I found located the learners, sorters, and "collectors." Two other buildings, one on each side of the main hall, contain the stores, inspection department,\* kitchens, tea-rooms, dispensary, etc., etc., together with the rooms occupied by the officers and gentlemen who manage

\* These are for factory purposes only, the general stores and inspection branch being in other blocks of buildings.

the department. In all these matters strict attention to business principles is obviously necessary, while at the same time the treatment of employees and general arrangements must be such as befit an important branch of the public service of a great country.

No one would imagine how much there is to be done, both before and after the actual making of the garments required. All material, whether cotton or woollen, all braid, lace, buttons, badges—in short, every separate article used in the manufacture of uniforms and the various "necessaries," as they are called, required by our soldiers, is tested, examined, weighed, and measured in the most careful way before being issued to the various workers. There is a special machine for measuring the length and width of a piece of stuff, which is also weighed at the same time;

it is then sealed with a lead seal, which cannot be taken off without tearing out a portion of the fabric itself.

The stuff is then passed over a roller about eight feet from the ground, and so arranged that the light shines through it, thus enabling the men who stand on either side to see the slightest defect or imperfection at a glance. The next process is to test for strength, a small bit of the stuff being stretched by a machine to ascertain its tearing point, which is then indicated in pounds on a dial. The whipcord I saw operated upon tore across at two hundred and forty pounds. This seemed very high, but as it was intended to clothe the nether man of our Mounted Infantry, no doubt it should be thoroughly reliable. I thought it would make a serviceable riding-habit for rough work.

Then came a chemical examination to see if the dye were fast, and finally the much-tortured stuff was passed over a machine which restored it to the original folds of its primeval bale. The exact weight, length, and breadth are noted on the lead seal; deductions from the contractor's price are made for any defects discovered, and the process of inspection is at an end.

We will follow our piece of stuff on its career as it is handed to the cutters, by whom it is folded into from fifteen to fifty thicknesses, the top one of which is marked with chalk in the shape desired. The machine then cuts out the portions of garments with the most beautiful accuracy and despatch. Only flannel for shirts can be cut in fifty thicknesses; cloths can seldom be cut into more than fifteen. This part of the business is done by men. The next stage in the process is called collecting, and this is undertaken by some of the younger girls, who separate the different portions of one garment from their similar companions, and roll up in one bundle all the necessary parts, ready to be given to the "piece-workers"—i.e. the women in the manufacturing department, who actually machine and finish the whole.

In the meantime, in a small side room another set of young girls, about fourteen years of age, are engaged in sorting and packing up into little brown-paper parcels the numbers of buttons, hooks and eyes, and other necessary adjuncts which the piece-workers require, so that the latter find themselves fully provided with everything for the special bit of work they have undertaken, and are not obliged to waste time in hunting for stray objects. The work done by these women is very good indeed, that done by the staff-workers being quite beautiful and perfect in finish. They belong to the highest class of female employees, and are very well paid. They often receive thirty shillings a week, and in some cases, with overtime

earnings, their takings mount up to as much as three pounds. They make the more elaborate uniforms worn by the Guards' band, trumpeters, etc., and the care and delicate manipulation shown in working gold and other braids is really admirable.

Having done a certain amount of gold embroidery myself, it occurred to me to ask one of these "tailoresses," as they are called when they have attained proficiency, whether she did not find her eyes suffer from the glitter and dazzle; and she replied that she did, but that it was such pretty light work that she would rather do it than anything else. It is naturally much more arduous and fatiguing to make up coarse or heavy material.

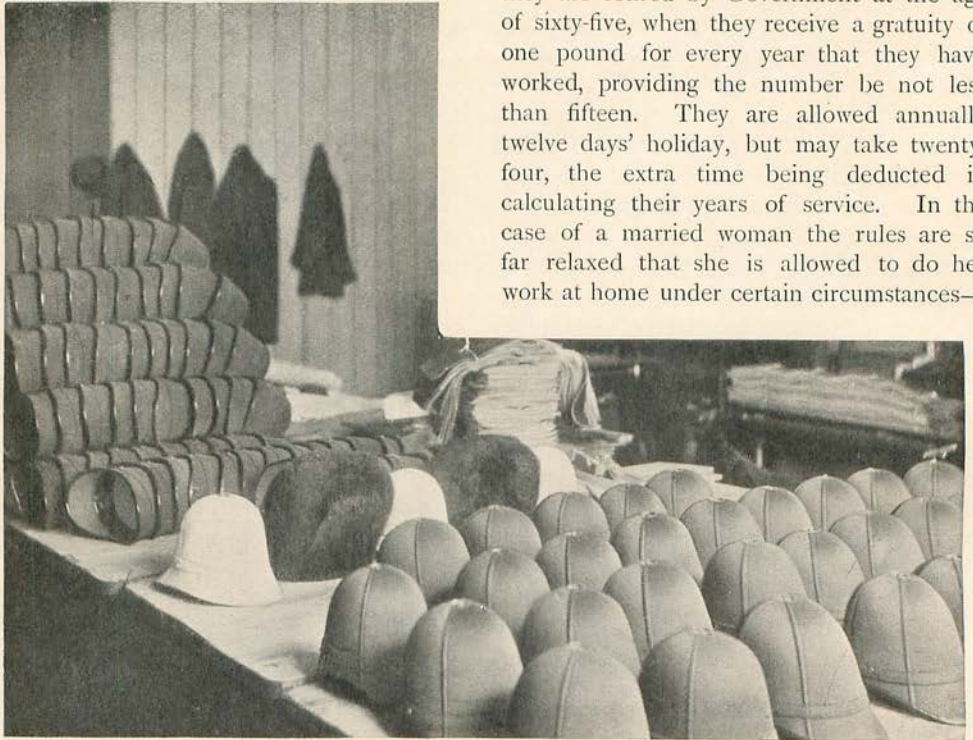
The Army Clothing Department has for some years past trained its own workers, finding it inadvisable to rely on the labours of ordinary seamstresses unskilled in the special kind of work. They enter the department at fourteen, and are put to "sorting" and "collecting" until they go into the "learners" division, which they



PRESSING THE SEAMS.

usually do at sixteen. Here they are placed under a forewoman, who teaches them their business, and in six months' time they are expected to be able to earn ten shillings a week. If they cannot do this they are considered unsatisfactory, and are liable to dismissal. Low earnings, such as eight

learn to work more neatly they are promoted, *via* his frock to his tunic, while if they are clever and industrious they arrive at being tailoresses and staff-workers, their pay improving with each successive rise in the class of work they are set to. After passing through the various grades they are retired by Government at the age of sixty-five, when they receive a gratuity of one pound for every year that they have worked, providing the number be not less than fifteen. They are allowed annually twelve days' holiday, but may take twenty-four, the extra time being deducted in calculating their years of service. In the case of a married woman the rules are so far relaxed that she is allowed to do her work at home under certain circumstances—



HELMETS.

shillings a week, would be entered against them in the matron's book, unless they had a very good excuse to offer, and this would militate against their being re-engaged, even in a time like the present, when the whole establishment is working at high pressure.

The piece-workers are all under a matron, but the sorters and collectors are not. They are remarkably good-looking, respectable, and well-mannered, and it is evident that the authorities exercise considerable care in their selection and supervision. Servants are not usually taken, as household work roughens and thickens their fingers, and soldiers' daughters are given the preference. The girls begin, so to speak, at the lowest end of the soldier's figure; as they

that is, for two months before and six months after a baby is born.

Among the women in ordinary tailors' shops, one of the great grievances has long been the weight of the irons used to press the heavy cloth and other stuffs with which they have to deal, and I have seen many poor creatures in hospitals, injured, in some cases for life, by lifting irons too heavy for their strength; but in the Army Clothing Department nothing of this kind exists. By means of an ingenious arrangement, the weight of about forty pounds which is required for pressing seams in thick cloth is raised from below by the foot, while the iron itself, which is heated by gas, is balanced in such a manner that a child

can easily move it into position. Most of the machines also are worked by power and not by treadle, which must be a great saving of fatigue. As well as the ordinary sewing-machines, there are others for making button- and eyelet-holes, which seem to accomplish a good deal of strong and accurate work in a short time.

I saw no caps being made, although plenty were being "viewed," and I believe that all these are supplied from the outside by contract. The same applies to stockings, which are inspected by women and not by men. This is one of the most irksome tasks they can be set to, for they are obliged to put their hands entirely into the foot of the stocking and spread out their fingers so as thoroughly to search for defects. The result of this at first is that the rough wool takes most of the skin off their hands.

In the stores I was shown a countless army of contract boots, all awaiting their turn

to be passed by the proper officials, or else reposing sadly upon the heap of the rejected. Government reserves the right to strip the soles off 2 per cent. of the number supplied—to see, I suppose, that they really are leather, and not *papier-mâché*. I picked one boot off the "accepted" heap, and found it strong but roughly made, and on putting my hand inside I could feel no perceptibly hard edges which might hurt the foot. All the boots were of tan leather, which the soldiers themselves subsequently blacken for ordinary service, or grease for active service. I also saw large quantities of canvas shoes which the men wear in hospital, or change into in the evening, when they have done their day's work.

Almost everything that the mind can conceive as being necessary to a soldier is here kept in store, those articles which are not manufactured in the department itself being contracted for; and among the latter



THE FACTORY.

I was shown some excellent mess-tins, one of which I should have liked for myself when travelling. Forks, spoons, knives, buttons, badges, all passed in procession before my eyes, each item undergoing careful examination before it is officially stamped and issued for use, or placed in store.

The packing division was especially interesting, parcels of clothing being reduced to about one half their natural size by hydraulic pressure. This is entirely done by men, and they are now so busy that work goes on all night. Even when the bales of clothing or flannel are not to be sent off immediately, they are still submitted to the process of compression, in order to store them in as small a space as possible.

Certainly the prettiest sight in the whole establishment is the room where gold-embroidered badges are kept. These are supplied by contract, and to any one who knows the difficulties of dealing with gold thread, they are a delightful and instructive sight. They are carefully kept in drawers with sliding covers to them, so as to exclude the fog and dust of London air. A little farther on in the same portion of the building there is a glass case containing sealed patterns of all the different kinds of caps, and another in which the helmets, bearskins, and feather bonnets worn by different regiments are displayed. Some of the more valuable of the Guards' bearskins are worth as much as nine pounds, while I saw others which were valued at seven shillings and sixpence. They looked really imposing and almost as good as the Guards', until the actual quality of the fur came to be investigated. The feather bonnets worn by the Highland Brigade cost about four pounds. Here, too, the badges of the different regiments are kept, and some of them are genuinely pretty and artistic in design, a certain number being of real silver, while the rest are made of white metal left plain or gilt.

Throughout the whole department the greatest order and discipline seem to reign, and I was particularly struck with the quiet, steady way in which the women went about their work. Two funds are established for their benefit, and are both

managed by a president and committee, the latter being chosen by the women from among themselves. The Tea and Dining Fund provides a dinner of meat, potatoes, and vegetables for fivepence, and the cook informed me that he calculates to use about one hundred and twenty pounds of meat a day, allowing half a pound to each dinner. The process of cooking reduces the half-pound to four ounces, and this is duly weighed before being served out. A small beef-steak pudding with potatoes costs fourpence, a pint of soup and the same amount of tea one penny, but with the latter the women get a thick slice of bread-and-butter thrown in. Pastry and cakes cost a penny, and these prices enable the committee to pay its way and make a little profit, which is handed over to the Provident Fund after thirty pounds has been deducted and lodged in the bank to carry on the concern.

To the Provident Fund the women subscribe twopence a week, and for this sum they obtain really important advantages. If they are sick, they receive six shillings a week for the first eight, and three shillings for the second eight, weeks of their illness during any one year. At Christmas any surplus cash is divided. I saw by the balance-sheet that in 1898 each member whose subscriptions had been fully paid received a dividend of eight shillings—an amount equal to nearly the whole of her annual payment. Grants are made by this Fund to aged members as well as to those who are ill; free dinners, in case of necessity, are also given, while beef-tea is distributed to those who need it, there being a grant of about six pounds a year from the Treasury for this purpose.

The women are very kind to each other, and out of their modest earnings unite in assisting such of their number as are in trouble. Whilst I was visiting the matron's office two really beautiful wreaths were brought in, subscribed for by the piece-workers for one of their companions recently dead, and I was told that as much as five pounds is often collected by the "committee-women" to pay for mourning or for funeral expenses.