

# Wholesale Millinery, Etc.

BY GERTRUDE BACON.

ILLUSTRATED WITH PHOTOGRAPHS TAKEN  
BY THE AUTHOR.



THE names of our great London drapers, costumiers, and milliners are household words to all. To speak of Peter Robinson,

Hitchcock, Williams, Marshall and Snelgrove is to recall instantly visions of fascinating shop-windows, enticing showrooms, and long vistas of counters, behind which are stored all the rich and rare materials that go to clothe and adorn the beauty and fashion of the kingdom. Even the most casual visitor to these emporiums of delight cannot fail to be struck with the magnitude of the trade, and with the immense value of all the vast amount of beautiful and costly wares gathered together.

And yet in how many cases is it not the fact that what is unseen is infinitely more wonderful than that which is evident, and that the general public can often form but a very poor idea of the enormous extent of

the business done by many of the leading houses?

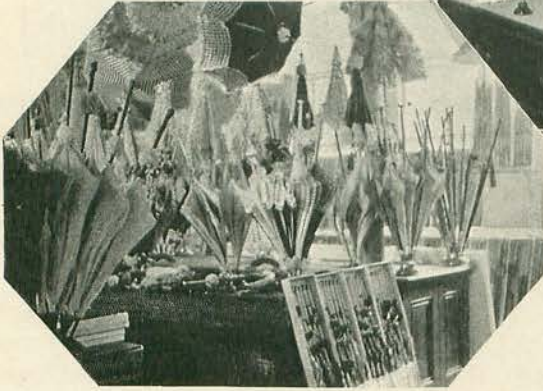
Above the retail departments of a number of great West End firms, reached by unfamiliar entrances, and known to only a certain small section of the community, are to be found large blocks of building, acres of showrooms, and stores of the richest fabrics, that the outside world never sees. Down in the city, in crowded streets and narrow lanes, stand huge establishments, packed with goods and teeming with busy life, whose names the majority of the general public have never even heard of. The password to these unknown regions is "Wholesale." To those unconnected with the actual trade the doors are not open; but an outsider who, by good chance or good fortune, has once penetrated within is not likely soon to forget the experience.



"FLOWERS THAT BLOOM IN THE CITY."



Let us suppose for the nonce that we are travellers for some great manufactory, or members of a big provincial establishment come to London to choose our summer stock; and let us pay our first visit to the wholesale department of a great silk merchant.



A CORNER IN PARASOLS.

We enter by an unfamiliar door, and a lift conveys us at once to the upper floors of the building. We reach first an enormous room, handsomely decorated, and lighted from the roof, whose hundreds of shelves are filled and whose many counters are littered with the richest fabrics. Silks and satins of the most delicate and lovely shades are lying about in lavish confusion. Buyers are turning over with the utmost callousness great piles of sheeny stuff of rainbow hues that positively make one's mouth water. Silks everywhere — stacks and mounds of them. To estimate the actual value in money of the contents of this room alone would be a Herculean task, but the result would certainly have to be expressed in many thousands of pounds. One wonders where, in these poverty-stricken times, all the rich people come from who are clothed in such splendid raiment. We wonder yet the more when we learn that, before the next season sets in, every scrap of what we are regarding will have been swept away to make room for an equally large supply of fresh goods.

This apartment is set aside for the coloured silks alone, a somewhat smaller *annexe* being



WHOLESALE MILLINERY.

sacred to the black silk department. The ribbons are represented by hundreds of thousands of cardboard boxes piled in order on the shelves of a whole range of small alcoves. In other rooms are mountains of dress materials, stacked to the roof in bales and bundles. All these change, too, with the seasons, and represent the newest fabrics and most novel designs from every country in Europe. France, Germany, Italy, Switzerland, as well as our great English mills, have contributed their best to the vast collection.

The buyers and sellers who throng the busy scene are of quite a different stamp from those we are so familiar with in the retail departments below. The fashionable lady, whose carriage waits without, and who is giving such an infinitude of trouble over the selection of a mantle in the showrooms, is conspicuous by her absence, as also the hard-working mother of many buying small quantities of flannel and longcloth. There are no harassed counter-jumpers, with their "Two-three a yard, madam," their complicated arithmetical calculations in fractions of inches and pence. In these quieter regions we buy our goods by the hundred or the score of yards, by the gross, the packet, and the bale. We set to work in a solid, business-like way, and we have a fellow-feeling with the important gentlemen behind the counters, with whom we are probably old friends, and indulge in friendly banter with the genial and experienced heads of the departments. Our business takes us some hours, and then



perhaps we repair to a well-served lunch together in the handsome dining-room belonging to the establishment.

Before we leave we must take a peep at one of the wholesale costume showrooms. This at first sight, with its stands of rich dresses and hanging coats and skirts, does not appear dissimilar to the retail apartments. But there is this important difference, that the handsome clothes we see here are not destined to be sold to distinct individuals to grace ball-rooms and garden-parties,

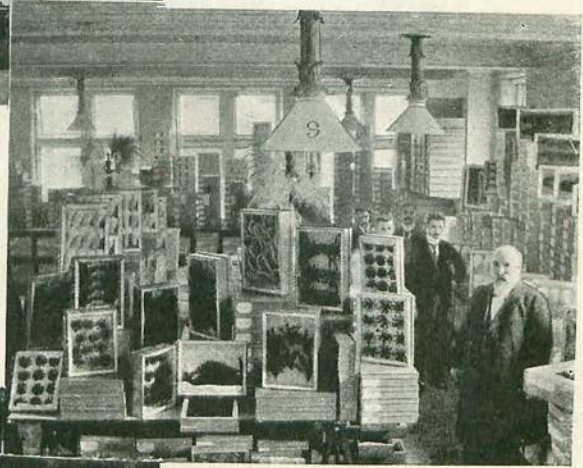
Then just a brief glimpse in the basement at the packing, shipping, and actual commercial side of the business. A busy scene it is, from the long table at which the swift packers are so hard at work with paper and string to the cheerful room where a score or more of typewriters are all clicking their fastest. What an enormous foreign as well as home business is done here is shown by the row of separate storerooms labelled "South Africa," "Australia," "India," "Canada," etc., etc., filled with bales of goods ready for transhipment! while the vast mountains of town and country packages, letters, and invoices are being negotiated with a method and despatch worthy of the General Post Office itself.

Now let us bend our steps eastward, and pay a brief visit to a city warehouse, say the well-known firm of Messrs. Hitchcock, Williams & Co., in St. Paul's Churchyard.



A LACE-ROOM.

but are to serve as models to dressmakers, and to adorn the shop-windows and showrooms of provincial establishments as samples of the latest Paris fashions.



TRIMMINGS.



IN THE MANTLE DEPARTMENT.

Large as is the retail business done by this house, it is wholly eclipsed by the wholesale trade. This includes a vast number of different goods, comprised under that all-embracing term, "female dress"; and in search of our purchases we wander through a perfect maze of rooms, filled with cloaks and mantles, hats and bonnets, feathers, trimmings, embroideries, laces—what not



of the richest and best that goes to gladden the heart of a woman? Two of the most interesting spots are the straw and parasol departments. The former is filled with straw hat shapes of every hue and pattern and texture. The latter is a kaleidoscopic vision of all shades and colours, of graceful designs, of elaborate handles, of dainty shapes, conjuring up dreams of Ascot and Henley, and bright skies and brighter faces. This would be a room to sit in when the pitiless rain sweeps in eddying gusts against the windows, or the thick fog hides in its stifling pall the swelling dome of the Cathedral opposite.

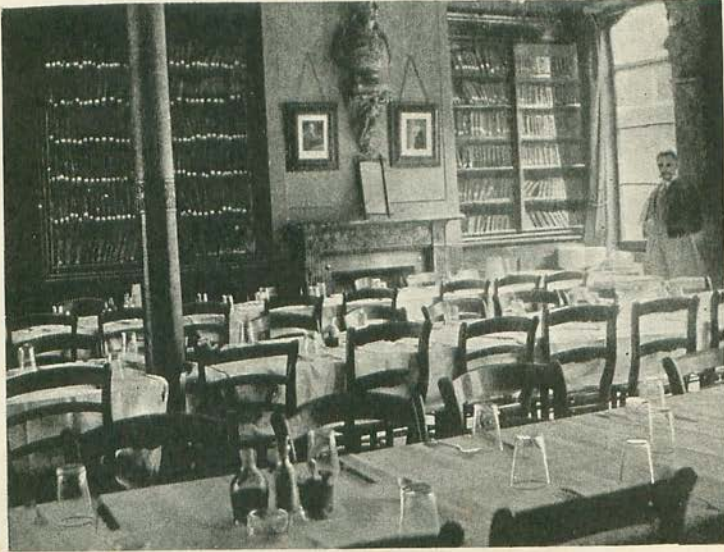
Great as is the amount and value of the goods contained within the four walls of the building, it affords, we are told, but a poor idea of the trade actually done. The greater

bulk of the wares pass direct between the manufactories and purchasers, samples only, for the most part, being actually stored in the warehouses. Be this as it may, the establishment affords work for from seven to eight hundred employés, male and female. And if we are curious as to the life and social condition of this small army, we may perhaps be permitted to take a brief glimpse at their private part of the house.

It is perhaps the ladies' side we visit, and the housekeeper shows us rows of dainty bedrooms, homelike in their comfort and taste, the well-furnished drawing-room, with

piano and books, the breakfast-room, and the fine library and dining-hall, whose long tables are just laid for the midday meal for the whole establishment. Prayers are read here every morning; concerts and lectures are held during the winter months. We can well believe that Messrs. Hitchcock, Williams & Co. are held among the kindest and most considerate of city firms, though we are glad to think that there are very many like them, to whom the comfort and well-being of their staff are a first consideration.

Then, before our purchases are complete, we must pay a last call on another city house, whose business lies almost wholly in the artificial flower line. The warehouse lies deep in the busy city, but, once within its doors, we are trans-



THE DINING-HALL AT MESSRS. HITCHCOCK, WILLIAMS & CO.

lated straight away from the crowded pavements and the stifling town to glorious gardens in their full summer magnificence, to sunny climes where gorgeous exotics grow in native luxuriance, to fields of scarlet poppies and blossom-laden orchards.

The scene in the large showrooms of this city fairyland is only to be likened to Covent Garden at its best, or the stalls of some national horticultural show; while it has certainly this advantage, that a few days will not see the whole mass of blooms withered and dropped, and that in bleakest winter days we can still gaze upon the gay trappings of spring and summer.