THE

# NINETEENTH CENTURY.

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## *PAGES FROM A WORK-GIRL'S DIARY.*

It is midday. The sun's rays beat fiercely on the crowded alleys of the Jewish settlement: the air is moist from the heavy rains. An unsavoury steam rises from the down-trodden slime of the East End streets and mixes with the stronger odours of the fried fish, the decomposing vegetables, and the second-hand meat which assert their presence to the eyes and nostrils of the passers-by.

For a brief interval the 'whirr' of the sewing-machines and the muffled sound of the presser's iron have ceased. Machinists and pressers, well-clothed and decorated with heavy watch-chains; Jewish girls with flashy hats, full figures, and large bustles; furtive-eyed Polish immigrants with their pallid faces and crouching forms; and here and there poverty-stricken Christian women—all alike hurry to and from the midday meal; while the labour-masters, with their wives and daughters, sit or lounge round about the house-door, and exchange notes on the incompetency of 'season hands,' the low price of work, the blackmail of shop foremen, or discuss the more agreeable topic of the last 'deal' in Petticoat Lane and the last venture on race-horses.

Jostled on and off the pavement, I wander on and on, seeking work. Hour after hour I have paced the highways and byways of the London Ghetto. No bills up except for a 'good tailoress,' and at these places I dare not apply, for I feel myself an impostor, and as yet my conscience and my fingers are equally unhardened. Each step I take I am more faint-hearted and more weary in body and limb. At last, in sheer despair, I summon up my courage. In a

window the usual bill, but seated on the doorstep a fat cheerful-looking daughter of Israel, who seems to invite application.

'Do you want a plain 'and?' say I, aping ineffectually a workwoman's manner and accent, and attaining only supreme awkwardness.

The Jewess glances quickly, first at my buttonless boots, then at my short but already bedraggled skirt, upwards along the straight line of my ill-fitting coat, to the tumbled black bonnet which sits ill at ease over an unkempt twist of hair.

'No,' is the curt reply.

'I can do all except buttonholes,' I insist in a more natural tone.

She looks at my face and hesitates. 'Where have you worked?'

'In the country,' I answer vaguely.

She turns her head slowly towards the passage of the house. 'Rebecca, do you want a hand?'

'Suited an hour ago,' shouts back Rebecca.

'There, there, you see,' remarks the Jewess in a deprecating and kindly voice as her head sinks into the circles of fat surrounding it. 'You will find plenty of bills in the next street; no fear of a decent young person, as knows her work, staying out o' door this time of year;' and then, turning to the woman by her side: 'It's rare tho' to find one as does. In these last three days, if we've sat down one, we've sat a dozen to the table, and not a woman amongst them as knows how to baste out a coat fit for the machine.'

Encouraged by these last words I turn round and trudge on. I ask at every house with a bill up, but always the same scrutinising glance at my clothes and the fatal words, 'We are suited!'

Is it because it is the middle of the week, or because they think I'm not genuine? think I. And at the next shop window I look nervously at my reflection, and am startled at my utterly forlorn appearance—destitute enough to be 'sweated' by any master.

'Sure, there's not much on 'er back to take to the h'old uncle,' remarks an Irish servant to her mistress, as I turn away from the last house advertising for a 'good tailoress.'

I feel horribly sick and ill; and I am so painfully conscious of my old clothes that I dare not ask for refreshment at an eating-house or even at a public. Any way I will have air, so I drag one foot after another into the Hackney thoroughfare. Straight in front of me, in a retail slop-shop of the lowest description, I see a large placard: 'Trouser and Vest Hands Wanted Immediately.' In another moment I am within a large workroom crowded with women and girls as ill-clothed as myself. At the head of a long table, examining finished garments, stands a hard-featured, shrewd-looking Jewess, in a stamped cotton velvet and with a gold-rimmed eyeglass.

'Do you want trouser hands?'

'Yes we do—indoor.'

'I'm a trouser finisher.'

The Jewess examines me from head to foot. My standard of dress suits her. 'Call at eight o'clock to-morrow morning.' And she turns from me to look over a pair of trousers handed up the table.

'What price do you pay?' say I with firmness.

'Why, according to the work done, to be sure. All prices,' she answers laconically.

'Then to-morrow at eight.' And I leave the shop hurriedly to escape that hard gaze of my future mistress. Again in the open street: the dazed-headiness, the dragging back-ache, and the sore feet —all the physical ills and moral depressions of the out o' work—seem suddenly swept away. At length, after this weary pilgrimage, I have secured work. The cool evening breeze, the picturesque life and stirring activity of the broad highway, even the sounds and sights of East London, add to my feeling of intense exhilaration. Only one drawback to perfect content: *Can* I 'finish' trousers?

At a few minutes past eight the following morning I am standing in front of 'MOSES AND SON. CHEAP CLOTHING.' In the window two shop-boys are arranging the show garments: coats and vests (sold together) 17*s.* to 22*s.*; trousers from 4*s.* 6*d.* up to 11*s.* 6*d.*

'Coats evidently made out: I wonder where and at what price?' ponders the investigator as the work-girl loiters at the door.

'You'd better come in,' says the friendly voice of a fellow worker as she brushes past me. 'You're a new-comer; the missus will expect you to be there sharp.'

I follow her into the retail shop and thence through a roughly made wooden door. The workroom is long and irregularly shaped, somewhat low and dark near the entrance, but expanding into a lofty skylight at the further end. The walls are lined with match-boarding; in a prominent place, framed and under glass, hang the *Factory and Workshop Regulations*. Close by the door, and well within reach of the gas-stove (used for heating irons), two small but high tables serve the pressers: a long low plank table, furnished with a wooden rail for the feet, forms on either side of it, chairs top and bottom, runs lengthways for the trouser finishers; a high table for the basters; and, directly under the skylight, two other tables for machinists and vest hands complete the furniture of the room. Through an open door, at the extreme end of the workshop, you can see the private kitchen of the Moses family, and beyond, in a very limited backyard, an outhouse, and, near to it, a tap and sink for the use of all the inmates of the establishment.

Some thirty women and girls are crowding in. The first arrivals hang bonnets and shawls on the scanty supply of nails jotted here

and there along the wooden partition separating the front shop from the workroom; the later comers shed their outdoor garments in various corners. There is a general Babel of voices as each 'hand' settles down in front of the bundle of work and the old tobacco or candle box that holds the cottons, twist, gimp, needles, thimble, and scissors belonging to her. They are all English or Irish women, with the exception of some half-dozen well-dressed 'young ladies' (daughters of the house), one of whom acts as forewoman, while the others are already at work on the vests. The 'missus' is still at breakfast. A few minutes after the half-hour the two pressers (English lads are the only men employed) saunter lazily into the room, light up the gas jet, and prepare the irons.

The forewoman calls for a pair of trousers, already machined, and hands them to me. I turn them over and over, puzzled to know where to begin. The work is quite different from that of the *bespoke* shop, at which I was trained—much coarser and not so well arranged. Besides, I have no cotton, thread, twist, or gimp. The woman next me explains: 'You'll 'ave to bring trimmings; we h'ain't supplied with them things y'ere; but I'll lend you some, jist to set off with.'

'What ought I to buy?' I ask, feeling rather helpless.

At this moment the 'missus' sweeps into the room. She is a big woman, enormously developed in the hips and thighs; she has strongly marked Jewish features, and, I see now, she is blind of one eye. The sardonic and enigmatical expression of her countenance puzzles me with its far-off associations, until I remember the caricatures, sold in City shops for portraits, of the great Disraeli. Her hair is crisp and oily—once jet black, now, in places, gray—it twists itself in scanty locks over her forehead. The same stamped cotton velvet, of a large flowery pattern, that she wore yesterday; a heavy watch-chain, plentiful supply of rings, and a spotlessly clean apron.

'Good-morning to you,' she says graciously to the whole assembly as she walks round our table towards my seat. 'Sarah, have you given this young person some work?'

'Yes,' replies Sarah; 'fourpence halfpenny's.'

'I have not got any trimmings. I did not know that I had to supply them. Where I worked before they were given,' I ejaculate humbly.

'That's easily managed; the shop's just round the corner— Sarah,' she calls across the table, 'you're going out—just get the young person her trimmings. The lady next you will tell you what you want,' she adds in a lower tone, bending over between us.

The 'lady' next me is already my friend. She is a neat and respectable married woman with a look of conscious superiority to her surroundings. Like all the trouser hands she is paid by the piece; but in spite of this she is ready to give me up time in explaining how I am to set about my work.

'You'll feel a bit strange the first day. 'Ave you been long out of work?'

'Yes,' I answer abruptly.

'Ah! that accounts for you're being a bit awkward-like. One's fingers feel like so many thumbs after a slack time.'

And certainly mine do. I feel nervous, and very much on trial. The growing heat of the room, the form so crowded that one must sit sideways to secure even a limited freedom for one's elbows; the general strangeness of my position—all these circumstances unite to incapacitate a true hater of needlework for even the roughest of sewing. However, happily for me no one pays me much attention. As the morning wears on, the noise increases. The two pressers have worked up their spirits, and a lively exchange of chaff and bad language is thrown from the two lads at the pressing (immediately behind us) to the girls round our table. Offers of kisses, sharp despatches to the devil and his abode, a constant and meaningless use of the inevitable adjective, form the staple of the conversation between the pressers and the younger hands; while the elder women whisper scandal and news in each other's ears. From the further end of the room catches of music-hall songs break into the monotonous whirr of the sewing-machine. The somewhat crude and unrhythmical chorus—

> Why should not the girls have freedom now and then?
> And if a girl likes a man, why should she not propose?
> Why should the little girls always be led by the nose?

seems the favourite refrain, and, judging from the gusto with which it is repeated, expresses the dominant sentiment of the work-girls. Now and again the mistress shouts out, 'Sing in time, girls; I don't mind your singing, but sing in time.' There is a free giving and taking of each other's trimmings, a kindly and general supervision of each other's work—altogether a hearty geniality of a rough sort. The enigmatical and sardonic-looking Jewess sits at the upper end of our table, scans the finished garment through her gold-rimmed eyeglass, encourages or scolds as befits the case; or, screwing up her blind eye, joins in the chatter and broad-witted talk of the workwomen immediately surrounding her.

'The missus 'as sixteen children,' remarks my friend Mrs. Long confidentially—'h'eight by Mr. Moses, and h'eight by the master she buried years ago. All them girls at the bottom table ar' 'er daughters.'

'They are a nice-looking set,' say I, in a complimentary tone.

'Yes, it's a pity some of the girls in the shop h'ain't like them,' matters my respectable friend. 'They're an awful bad lot, some of them. Why, bless you, that young person as is laughing and joking with the pressers jist be'ind us'—and here follow horrible

details of the domestic vice and unnatural crime which disgrace the so-called 'Christian' life of East London.

'Eh, eh!' joins in the woman next her, with a satisfied sniff at the scandal (a regular woman of the slums, with nose and skin patched by drink), 'it's h'ill thinking of what you may 'ave to touch in these sort of places.'

'Well to be sure,' rejoins Mrs. Long, nettled both by the tone of superiority and by the unwarranted interruption of her disreputable neighbour. 'I've worked at this same place for h'eight years and never yet 'ave I 'ad words with anyone. There's reg'ler work the week round, and reg'ler pay on a Saturday; and y're money kept for you, if you 'appen to be a-cleaning. There's no need to mix y'rself up with them whose look you don't like,' she adds, with just a perceptible edging away from the slum woman, as if to emphasise her words—'there's some of all sorts y'ere.'

'H'I'm one of that sort,' blusters the woman of the slums, 'that h'answers a person back when they call me bl—y names. H'I'll give the last word to no one.'

'I don't choose to 'old conversation wi' the like of they,' says Mrs. Long, pursing up her thin lips as if to end this undesired intercourse: 'it h'ain't as if *I* 'ad to work for my living. My 'usband's in reg'ler work; it's only for the hextras like that I work, and jist for them times, per'aps a month the 'ole year through, that the building trade's slack.'

This effectually silences the woman of the slums. Her husband, alas! comes home drunk every night and spends the irregularly earned pence lounging about the publics (so I am afterwards informed by Mrs. Long). She has an ill-favoured daughter by her side, with a black eye and a swollen face, with whom she exchanges work and bad language and shares greasy victuals.

'One o'clock,' shouts a shrill boy's voice.

'Stop work,' orders the mistress.

'I wish I might finish this bit,' I say pathetically to my friend, painfully conscious of the shortcoming in the quantity if not in the quality of my work.

'You mustn't; it's the dinner hour.'

The pressers are already off, the mistress and her daughters retire into the kitchen: the greater number of women and girls turn out into the street, while one or two pull baskets from under the table, spread out before them, on dirty newspapers, cracked mugs, bits of bread and butter, cold sausage or salt fish; and lift, from off the gas-stove, the tin teapot wherein their drink has been stewing since the early morning. Heartily thankful for a breath of fresh air and a change from my cramped posture, I wander up and down the open street, and end my 'dinner hour' by turning into a cheap shop for a bun and a fresh cup of tea. Back again at two.

'You must work sharper than this,' remarks the mistress, who is inspecting my work. I colour up and tremble perceptibly as I meet the scrutinising gaze of the hard-featured Jewess. She looks into my eyes with a comically puzzled expression, and adds in a gentler voice: 'You must work a little quicker for your own sake. We've had worse buttonholes than these, but it don't look as if you'd been 'customed to much work.'

But now the drama of the day begins. The two pressers saunter in ten minutes after the hour. This brings down upon them the ire of the Jewess. They, however, seem masters of the situation, for they answer her back in far choicer language than that in which they were addressed—language which I fear (even in a private diary) I could hardly reproduce; they assert their right to come when they choose; they declare that if they want a day off they 'will see her to the devil and take it;' and lastly, as a climax to all insults, they threaten her with the 'factory man,' and taunt her with gambling away on racehorses the money she 'sweats' out of them.

At these last words the enigmatical and sardonic expression of the Jewess changes into one of out-bursting rage. All resemblance to the City caricatures of that great passionless spirit vanishes. The deep furrows extending from just above the nostril to the corner of the mouth—lines which must surely express some race experience of the children of Israel—open out into one universal bubble of human fury. A perfect volley of oaths fly in quick succession between the principal combatants; while woman after woman joins in the fray, taking the missus's side against the pressers. The woman of the slums actually rises in her seat and prepares to use her fists; while her daughter seizes the opportunity to empty the small bottle of brandy hidden under her mother's trimmings. Mrs. Long purses up her thin lips still more tightly, and looks down steadily at her work. At this critical point—enter the master.

Mr. Moses is a corpulent, well-dressed English Jew. His face is heavy and sensual, his eyes sheepish, his reputation among his wife's 'hands' none of the best. At this moment, his one desire is to keep the Queen's peace in his establishment. I suspect, also, from the sleepy viciousness of his expression, that he himself suffers occasionally from the missus's forcible tongue; and with this bevy of women shouting on all sides he feels the masculine side of the question. Any way, he is inclined to take a strictly impartial view of the row. 'Sit down, Mrs. Jones,' he shouts to the woman of the slums—'sit you down, or you and that —— daughter of yours leave the shop this very instant. Now, lads, just you be quiet; go on with your work and don't speak to my wife.' And then, turning to his wife, in a lower tone—'Why won't you leave them alone and not answer them?' and the rest of his speech we cannot hear; but, judging from the tone and the look, it takes the form of deprecat-

ing expostulation. I catch the words 'push of work' and 'season hands.'

'Why, if you were only a bit of a man,' cries the mistress, raising her voice so that all may hear, 'you'd throw those two bl—y rascals out. I'd throw them out at any price, if I were a woman's husband. The idea of saying how I spend my money—what's that to him? And that Jo says he'll call the factory man in. He may call the devil in (and he's welcome)—the only person as he'll notice will be himself. The idea of him saying that I spend my money on horses; as if I couldn't spend money on anything I like. As if you wouldn't give me money as I earn, when I asks you, Mr. Moses,' gasps the Jewess, as she looks threateningly at her partner, 'and never ask where it goes to.' The betting on horses is evidently a sore point.

'It isn't their business what you do with your money,' rejoins the master soothingly. 'But just let them alone, and tell those girls to be quiet. It's more than half the girls' fault—they're always at the fellows,' he adds, anxious to shift the blame into a safe quarter.

The storm lulls, and Mr. Moses returns into the front shop. But the anger of the Jewess is not yet exhausted. A stray word, and the quick firing of abusive language between the mistress and the pressers begins afresh; though this time the women, awed by the master's interference, are silent. The tall weak-looking young man, Jo by name, shouts the longest and loudest; but, as Mrs. Long whispers to me without raising her eyes from her work, 'It's 'Arry as makes the bullets—jist listen to 'im—but it's Jo as fires 'em!'

At last it subsides. Women (outdoor hands) troop in with bundles of finished trousers. The bubbling rage of the injured woman yields to the keen-eyed supervision of the profit-making Jewess. 'I'd have nothing but indoor hands, if I knew where to find them and had a room to put them into,' she mutters to Esther as she turns over garment after garment. 'Just look at this work, it's all soap! Call again on Monday morning, Mrs. Smith. But mind it *is* Monday and not Tuesday morning. You understand English, don't you?—Monday morning.'

A small boy creeps into the shop laden with unfinished work. 'What d'you say to this, Sarah? Mrs. Hall sends word she was washing on Monday, cleaning on Tuesday, and I suppose playing the devil on Wednesday, for here's Thursday, with shop day to-morrow, and the work's untouched. Now, girls, be quick with your work,' continues the mistress as she throws the bundle on to our table—'all this to be done extra before Friday. Perkins won't wait for no one!'

'The name of a wholesale shipping firm; so she works for export as well as for retail and pays same price for both,' inwardly notes the investigator as she glances at the shoddy garments. (The work-girl meanwhile pushes her needle into her thumb-nail, and in her

agony digs her elbow into her neighbour's half-turned back, which causes a cannonade all round the table.)

'Law! how awkward she still be,' growls the woman of the slums, anxious to pick a quarrel and vent her unspent wrath.

At length teatime breaks the working-day. Pence have already been collected for the common can of milk; innumerable teapots are lifted off the gas-stove, small parcels of bread and butter, with a relish or a sweet, are everywhere unrolled. My neighbours, on either side, offer me tea, which I resolutely refuse. The mistress sips her cup at the head of the table. The obnoxious pressers have left for the half-hour. Her feelings break out—

'Pay them 5*s*. a day to abuse you! As if I couldn't spend my money on what I like; and as if Mr. Moses would ever ask—I'd like to see him ask me—how the money'd gone!'

All the women sympathise with her and vie with each other in abusing the absent pressers.

'It's h'awful, their language,' cries the slum woman; 'if I were the missus, I'd give the bl—y scoundrels tit for tat. Whativer's the use of bein' a missus if you've got to 'old in y're tongue?'

'As for the factory man,' continues the irate Jewess, turning to the other sore point, 'just fancy threatening me with him! Why they ar'n't fit to work in a respectable shop; they're d—d spies. I'd throw them out, if it cost me 100*l*. And if Mr. Moses were half a man, he'd do it too.'

At the word spy, I feel rather hot; but conscious of the innocence of my object, I remark, 'You have nothing to fear from the factory inspector; you keep the regulations exactly.'

'I don't deny,' she answers quite frankly, 'that if we're pressed for work I turn the girls upstairs; but it isn't once in three months I do it; and it all tells for their good.'

Two hours afterwards, and I have finished my second pair. 'This won't do,' she says as she looks over both pairs together. 'Here, take and undo the band of that one; I'll set this one to rights. Better have respectable persons who know little to work here than blaguards who know a lot—and a deal too much,' she mutters, smarting over the taunts of the 'factory man' and the money laid on horses.

'Eight o'clock by the Brewery clock,' cries the shrill voice.

'Ten minutes to,' shouts the missus, looking at her watch. 'However, it ain't worth while breaking the law for a few minutes. Stop work.'

This is most welcome to me. The heat since the gas has been lit is terrific, my fingers are horribly sore, and my back aches as if it would break. The women bundle up their work; one or two take it home. Everyone leaves her trimmings on the table, with scissors and thimble. Outside, the freshness of the evening air, the sensation of free movement, and rest to the weary eyes and

fingers constitute the keenest physical enjoyment I have ever yet experienced.

Friday morning, and I am hopelessly tired. Jammed between my two neighbours, with the garment of hard shoddy stuff on my knee, and with the whole day's work before me, I feel on the brink of deep disgrace as a work-girl. I am 'shaky like all over,' my fingers, worn in places into holes, refuse to push the thick needle through the objectionable substance; damp hands (the more I rub them in my apron the damper they become) stretch the thin linings out of place; my whole energy is riveted on my work, with the discouraging result that it becomes worse and worse. Mrs. Long works silently by my side at high pressure to bring a pair of 'ordered' trousers in to time. And she begins to scent dismissal.

'I keeps myself to myself,' she told me yesterday. 'Down y're they're all a-going down 'ill; except them Jews as is going hup.' And to-day she applies her theory strictly, and is unwilling to 'mix herself up' with even a respectable failure. So I bungle on without help until I have finished after a fashion.

'This will never do,' angrily remarks the mistress. And then, perceiving the culprit by her side, she adds sternly: 'This won't do—this work won't suit me; you want to go and learn somewhere first. This will never do—this won't suit me,' she repeats slowly as she pulls the work to pieces. She dismisses me from her side with a wave of her eyeglass, as if to say, 'It's no good answering me back again.'

Without a word I arrange my trimmings ready to depart if the missus persists.

Is it over-fatigue, or is it the perfect realisation of my position as a disgraced work-girl? An ominous lump rises in my throat, and my eyes fill with tears. There is a dead silence. The younger hands look up from their work sympathetically; Mrs. Long, with her head down, stitches on steadily; the woman of the slums gazes on me with bleared expression of mingled stupor and pity; fumbles underneath her work on the table and pushes something towards me. I hear the rattle of the brandy-bottle against the scissors as I see the old tobacco-box that holds her trimmings advancing towards me. Meanwhile the Jewess has screwed up her left eye and is looking at me through her eyeglass. The deep furrows of inherited experience again relax in favour of personal feeling. But this time it is human kindness instead of human fury. She beckons to me. In a second I am by her side.

'I'll see what I can do with you. If you like to stay and work on threepence-halfpennies, the same as I give to outdoor hands, you can take better work when you're fit for it. I'm sure I don't want to be hard on any decent young person as is trying to earn her living in a respectable way. There ain't so many respectable persons

in the world that we can afford to starve 'em,' the Jewess adds, casting an angry glance at the pressers. 'Sarah, give her a pair of threepence-halfpennies. I'll alter these for you. You sit between those two young ladies and they'll show you. You must help one another,' she says to the girls as they make room for me; 'tho' of course they all come here to make their own living; you can't expect them to teach you for ever.'

The girl who takes me under her especial charge is a respectably dressed and delicate-looking young woman, with none of the rowdy slovenliness or tarnished finery of the typical Gentile girl of East London. Slightly made, with a pale, weary face, she looks at least thirty (she tells me she is only just nineteen); she stitches silently, and seems hardly conscious of the boisterous life of her fellow-workers; but instead of Mrs. Long's air of ever-present superiority, her form, *face, manner, denote physical depression, lit up now and again by the dreamy consciousness of another world beyond the East End workroom.*

'You'll soon learn,' she says kindly; 'you must watch me fix this, and then you can do the next yourself.'

Directed and encouraged by her kindness, I work on, in a calmer frame of mind, listening to the conversation of my neighbours. Among the younger hands who sit at this end of the table it chiefly concerns the attraction of the rival music-halls, or the still more important question of the presents and attentions of their different 'blokes.' For monotonous work and bad food have not depressed the physical energies of these young women. With warm hearts, with overflowing good nature, with intellects keenly alive to the varied sights of East London, these genuine daughters of the people brim over with the frank enjoyment of low life. During the day their fingers and eyes are fully occupied; in the evenings, on holidays, in the slack season, their thoughts rush out and gather in the multitudinous excitements of the East End streets; while their feelings unburden themselves in the pleasure of promiscuous love-making. You cannot accuse them of immorality, for they have no consciousness of sin. The veneer of morality, the hidden but secretly self-conscious vice of that little set that styles itself 'London society' (in the city of millions!) are unknown to them. They live in the Garden of Eden of uncivilised life; as yet they have not tasted the forbidden fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, and the heaven and hell of an awakened conscience are alike undreamt of. There is only one Fall possible to them—drink, leading slowly but inevitably to the drunkard's death.

'I say, Milly,' shouts one to the other, 'you tell that bl—y brother of yours that I waits 'alf an 'our for 'im houtside the Paragon last night. I'll be blessed before I serves as 'is Round the Corner[1]

[1] The East End term for the lady you take to the theatre or the music-hall.

ag'in. 'Owever, at last, I says to myself, "a watched kittle niver biles," so I walks in by myself. The dressin' there is grand,' she adds enthusiastically.

'Eh! but you sh'd see the piece they're running at the Standard!' rejoins Milly. 'Jim's promised to take me up to one of them grand places up West next Saturday. Will you come along? I'll git Tom to come. You'll want to be a making of it up by that time. Tom's in reg'lar work and a rare catch h'as a sweet'eart,' laughs the sister of the faithless swain.

'It's too much trouble to go up West,' answers the girl, anxious to prove her indifference to Tom's attentions. 'I don't care to turn h'out 'fore 'alf-past nine. It takes a full hour to clean up and git a bit of supper, and that leaves three hours for our houting like; for mother don't hexpect us back 'fore 'alf-past twelve. But I don't say I wouldn't come, as it's the 'alf day, if Tom's very pressin',' she continues. 'I've 'eard it said them grand ladies as sits in the boxes and the stalls 'as low dresses on, like so many h'actrices, and h'it's as good h'as a play jist to look on 'em. So 'Arry told me, and 'e's a rare 'un for liking the look of them lords and ladies as lives up there.'

The pale, weary girl stitches silently by my side. She works harder than the others—finished four pair yesterday and hopes to finish the same to-day. 'Are you chapel?' she asks presently.

'Yes,' I reply, attending more to the spirit than to the letter of her question.

'Do you belong to the Army?' she says inquiringly, glancing at my plain grey dress, and no doubt remembering my close black bonnet.

'No,' I answer, 'do you?'

She shakes her head: 'They've tried to get me to join since I've been in London. But we're a quieter set than they. Mother and I have only been in London these two years since father's death,' she adds in an explanatory tone. 'Mother's a skilled vest hand; not this sort of work—she wouldn't look at this. She can make 2*l.* a week in good times; but now her eyesight's going fast. And it isn't much as I earn. I was brought up to teaching.'

'And why did you not go on with it?'

'I failed in the first examination. Then father died, and mother heard there were skilled hands wanted in London, so we left our home. But I've found a Bible-class in our street and I teaches there twice a week. That and the chapel on a Sunday is like a bit of the old home.' The work-girl sighs, and the far-off look of 'another world' gleams in the clear depths of her grey eyes. 'If you're going out for the dinner-hour, I might show you the chapel and the class-room,' she adds with hesitating gentleness; 'are you going home for dinner?'

'No, I shall get a cup of tea at Lockhart's, and a bun.'

'Why, you're niver a-goin' to dine off that!' cries the girl on my other side. And there is a whispering all round the table. Only a cup of tea and a bun means great poverty.

'You 'ad no tea last evening,' continues the same girl; 'now you must take a cup o' mine this afternoon.'

The hours of the day pass away quietly in work. There are no words between the mistress and the pressers, and the workshop life becomes monotonous. During the interval between dinner and tea a golden-haired young lady (married daughter of the Jewess), beautifully gloved and bonneted, covered with jewels, but with a somewhat unseasonable tippet of sable-tails, enters the workroom. She seats herself by her mother at the head of the table and chats confidentially. I hear the names of various racehorses and of forthcoming races. Apparently her husband belongs to the genus of 'betting men,' and, judging from her dress, he is a successful one. The mistress is in high good humour. At teatime she turns to me:

'Now, I'm very much interested in you; there is something in your face that's uncommon, and your voice too, that's odd—no word higher than another. The woman here will tell you, if I hadn't taken a fancy to your face and your voice I should have bundled you out long ago. Now what have you been?' she continues with gracious inquisitiveness.

'I hadn't to work when my father was in work,' I answer with literal truthfulness.

'A tidy-looking young person like you ought to get some respectable man to marry her—like my daughter here; you're more fit for that than to be making your own living in this sort of place. But, since you have come, I'll see what I can do with you. Come, you're getting on nicely,' she says encouragingly, as she looks over my work.

I am drinking the cup of tea forced on me by my neighbour. The pale, weary girl is munching her bread and butter.

'Won't you have some?' she says, as she pushes the paper towards me.

'No, thank you,' I answer.

'Sure?' and without more to do she lays a thick slice in my lap and turns away to avoid my thanks. A little bit of human kindness that goes to the heart and brings tears into the eyes of the investigator.

Work begins again. My friend has finished her third piece and is waiting for the fourth. She covers her head with her hands as she bends backward to rest the strained figure. In her grey eyes there is a look of intense weariness—weariness of body and mind. Another pair is handed to her and she begins again. She is a quick worker; but, work as hard as she may, she cannot clear much over

1*s.* a day after she has paid for trimmings. (A shilling a day is about the price of unskilled woman's labour.)

Another two hours and I say good-night.

'I'll be married in a week' are the last words I hear passing from Jo to Harry, 'and then my wife shall keep me.'

'I'll go to the bl—y workhouse,' jokes Harry, 'if I don't get a gal to keep me. I won't sweat here any longer for 5*s.* a day.'

BEATRICE POTTER.