

WOMEN AND THEIR WORK.

BOOK FOLDING AND SEWING.

"But words are things, and a small drop of ink,
Falling like dew upon a thought, produces
That which makes thousands—perhaps millions—think."

So wrote the poet Byron in true poetic strain, but with also a poet's license of exaggeration; for no one drop of ink, not even Stephens' famous blue-black, ever yet produced a book by magic. Much, very much, labour is necessary ere the *thought* can appear robed in book form, to start on its work of teaching men to pause and consider. Not only the pen's, but the needle's point must be guided aright, ere man can appeal to his fellow-men by print, and the eye convey to the reader the thoughts of one who cannot use, because of distance, or often of the silence of death, the quickest, the most natural form of expressing thought—namely, the sound of an earnest voice on the tympanum of the ear. The needle is woman's recognized weapon, as the sword is man's; and with regard to books only women work at the stitch, stitch, stitching required in the "Song of the Book." A sad song often, even as sad as Hood's ever famous "Song of the Shirt," for the public will have cheap literature, and the result is cheap and therefore indifferent labour. These women are employed either by the day or by piece work, according to the firm employing them. The former earn from fifteen to sixteen shillings a week, or two shilling and sixpence a day; the latter (of course in this case everything depends on the ability and quickness of the worker) often earn as much, in the busy season, as twenty-five shillings a week, but of course there are the off times to be considered, and during some months in the year work is very slack. Some of the women and girls are allowed to take the work home, but most work at the premises of their employers, the work being paid for at a penny a folio. Girls are occasionally apprenticed, but more often give time—*i.e.*, work for three months for no wage, and then commence with a very small one, gradually increasing until it reaches the usual rate of payment for the work. The girls commence when quite young. Folding and sewing are not the only branches of book making which are now principally in the hands of the women; for covering, binding—when done by hand—and gilding are also now nearly monopolized by them. For all the last named require neatness of touch rather than power of touch. The *trade*, shall I call it, is not overstocked; indeed at a busy time the women can afford to be quite independent with regard to choice of masters. There is no need for education in the

work, which is purely mechanical, and the girls are nearly all drawn from the middle classes, and are usually connected with the printing trade.

* * *

BUT far better paid than any of the above-mentioned workers are the girls who page the account-books. This is done by a small machine, which automatically changes the number each time, whilst the girl turns the pages with marvellous rapidity. The young women who are, to use an expressive Americanism, "smart" at this work can earn from thirty to thirty-five shillings per week; but it is much kept in the trade; outsiders are not warmly welcomed by their fellow-workwomen. The machine also needs practice in handling. Far more women than men are now employed in this work of "paging"; and women are also beginning to enter the lists against their brothers in the ruling of account-books, a business hitherto entirely kept in the hands of the sterner sex—one pretty remunerative also. Account-books do not get ruled by magic; but oh, the horror of the work, with its dreadful monotony. Which sex has the most patience to rule and rule for ever, I wonder? Women, I expect, where men, not books, are concerned. Have pity, reader, on the poor account-book king, his sceptre a pen, his life-work making, not laws, but lines, straight lines eternally. Have you ever cast a thought on his woes before? I expect not, for you knew not of them; but—

"There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,
Than are dreamt of in thy philosophy."

* * *

It is often noticeable how two men or women will start the same idea at the same time. It goes to prove that "brilliant notions" are more often the effect of an outside whisper than the result of a vivid imagination or the innate mental power of an individual brain. The idea seems to float in the air, and at last some one or some two often seize on it and form it into shape. Such has been the case with the much talked of idea of a servants' union, two such having been started almost simultaneously. One is called "Protective and Provident Servants' League"; the other, "Domestic Servants' Union." Whether they will become rivals or amalgamated remains to be seen; also, whether both fail, for the successful working of such an Union is fraught with difficulties far greater than that attending most Unions. By-the-bye, what a rage there is on for Unions—not the Union at present. "Union is Strength" should be the motto of 1890.

* * *

MISS GOUGH, who has worked well and long amongst a much-neglected, tempted, and despised

[previous page](#)

[next page](#)