

Baker Street Elementary

Presents
"The Life and Times in Victorian London"



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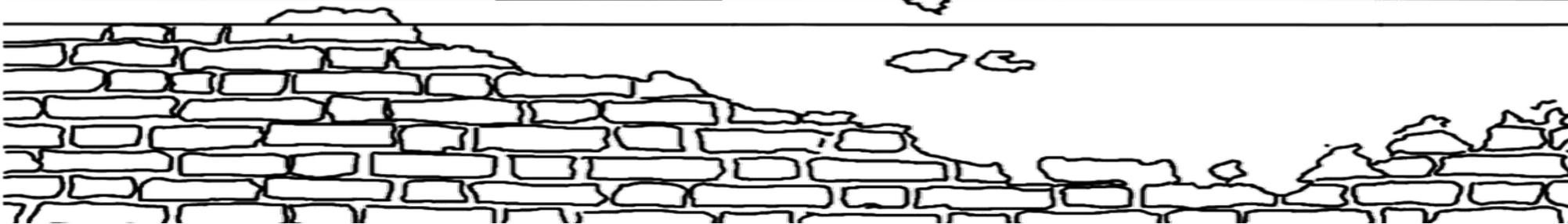
*# 076 -- Where Did You Get that Dress -- Victorian Fashion --
February, 2022*



*Welcome to topic # 076...
Today Miss Lyndsay and I will
be looking at the fashion
during the Victorian period.*



*Clothing in Victorian England,
especially women's dress,
served as one of the major
indicators of class and status.*



Watson often included a description of the clothing worn by a visitor to 221B for just this sort of designation.

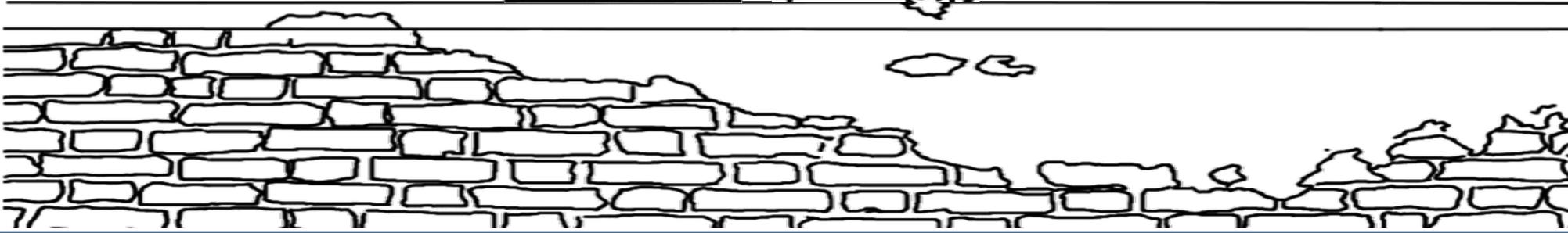


*Were the clothes
frayed? Dusty?
Lined with silk?
Seedy?*





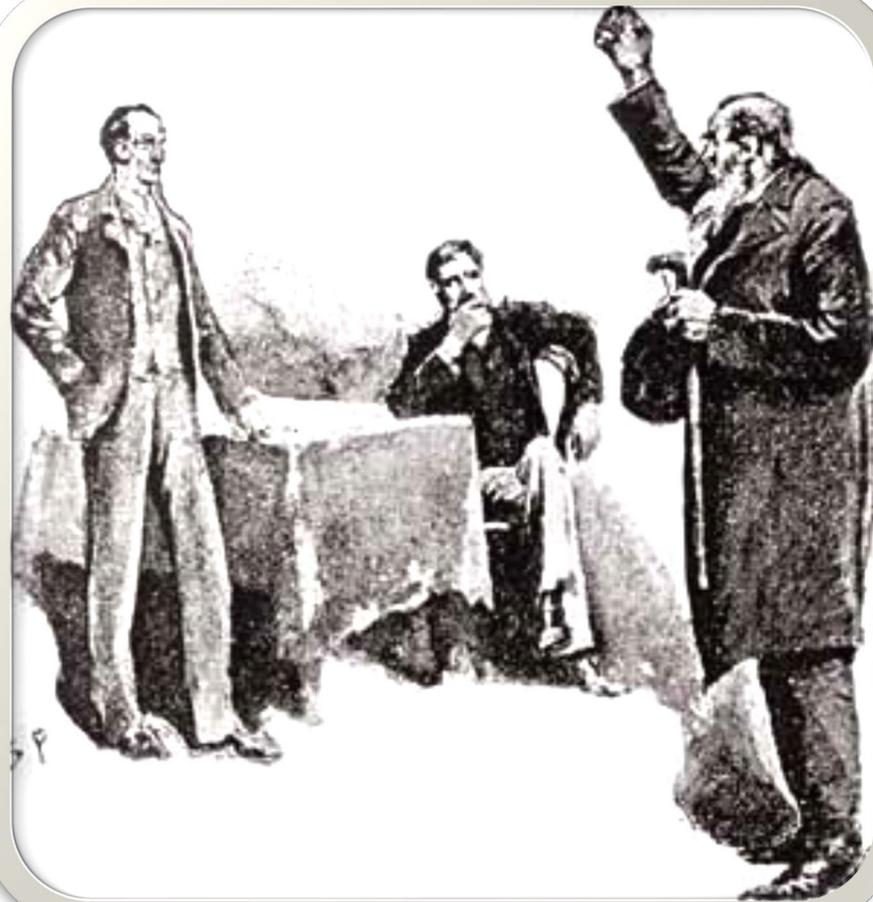
Even without Holmes' ability to deduce any number of characteristics and history from a person's dress...





...the casual reader would have been able to learn much from Watson's description because perhaps, as in no other era, did "clothes make the man."





While men's fashions changed little during the 19th century, women's clothing passed through a number of transformations.

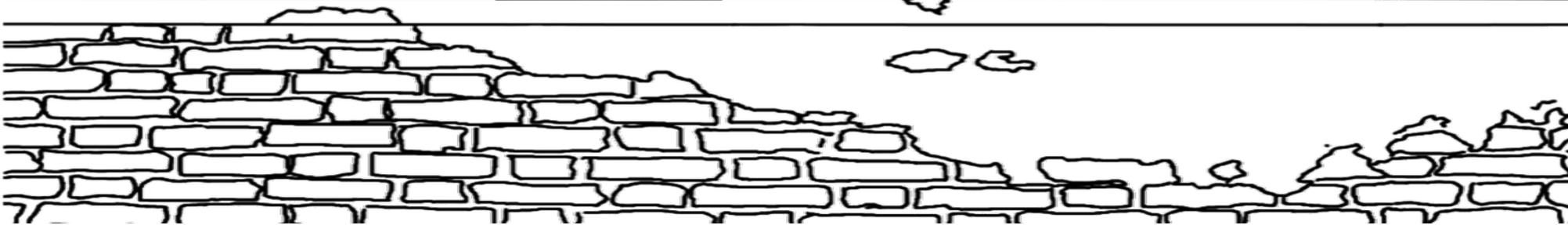
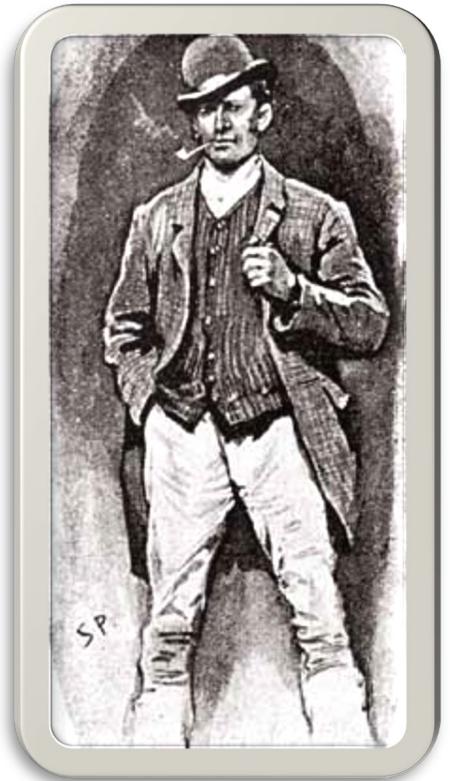




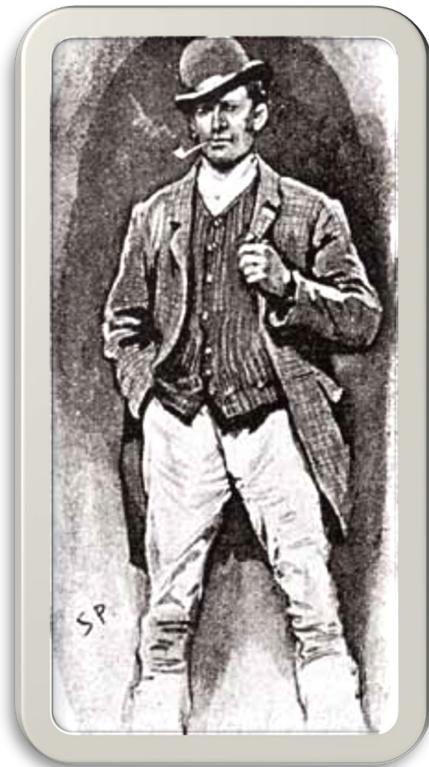
Menswear became more business-like, favoring dark, plain colors for those in the middle and upper classes.



Trousers, white shirts, and a dark coat (no checks or stripes) were considered acceptable apparel.



Laborers favored heavier fabrics, shorter jackets, and cloth caps.



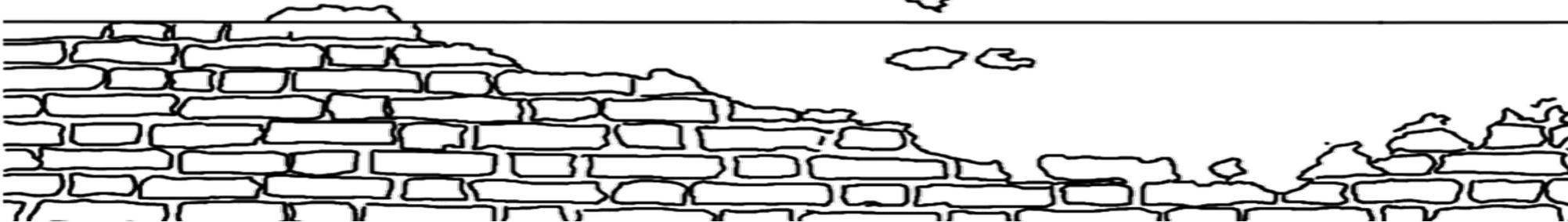
On the other hand, women's magazines and other publications promoted changes that required women to purchase new clothes for each season to remain fashionable.



This emphasis on alterations in women's fashions originated after the French Revolution and a shift in gender roles.



Women were to display "conspicuous consumption, conspicuous leisure, and conspicuous waste" as evidence of their husband's financial standing.



*One magazine suggested
the minimum wardrobe for
women should include "a
walking dress..."*





*...a country dress, a carriage
or visiting dress, an ordinary
evening dress, a dinner dress,
and a ball dress."*

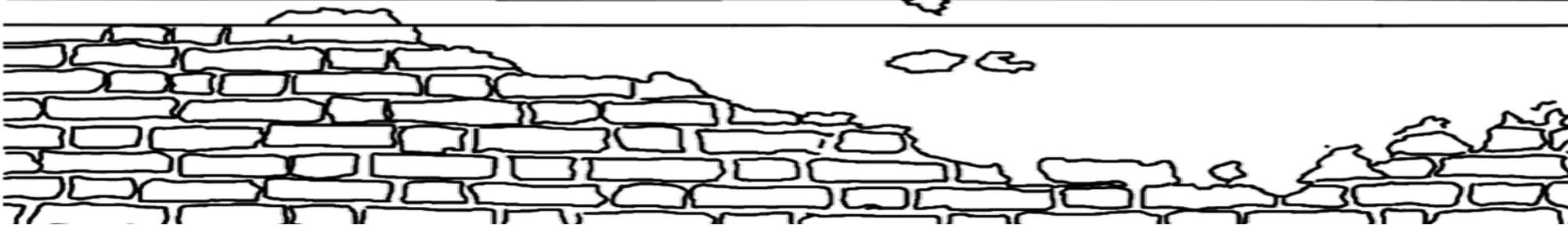




Of course, only a few could actually afford such frequent wardrobe changes, and those with lower incomes fueled a thriving business in second-hand clothing.



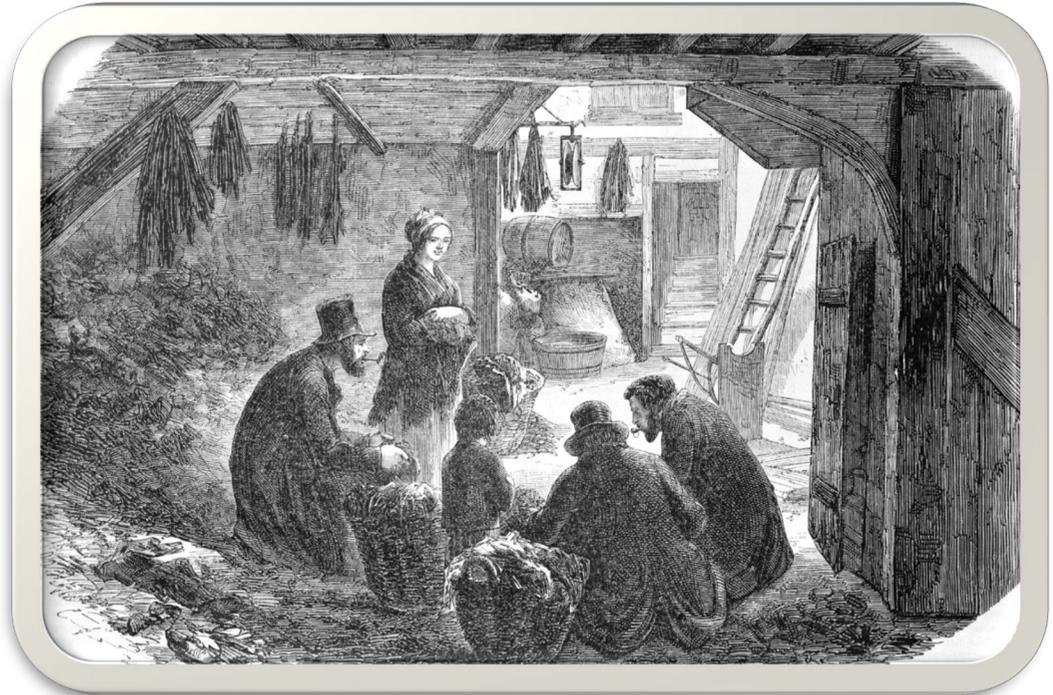
For those below an annual income of £50 (a little over £6000 in 2020 figures) the purchase of "new" items...



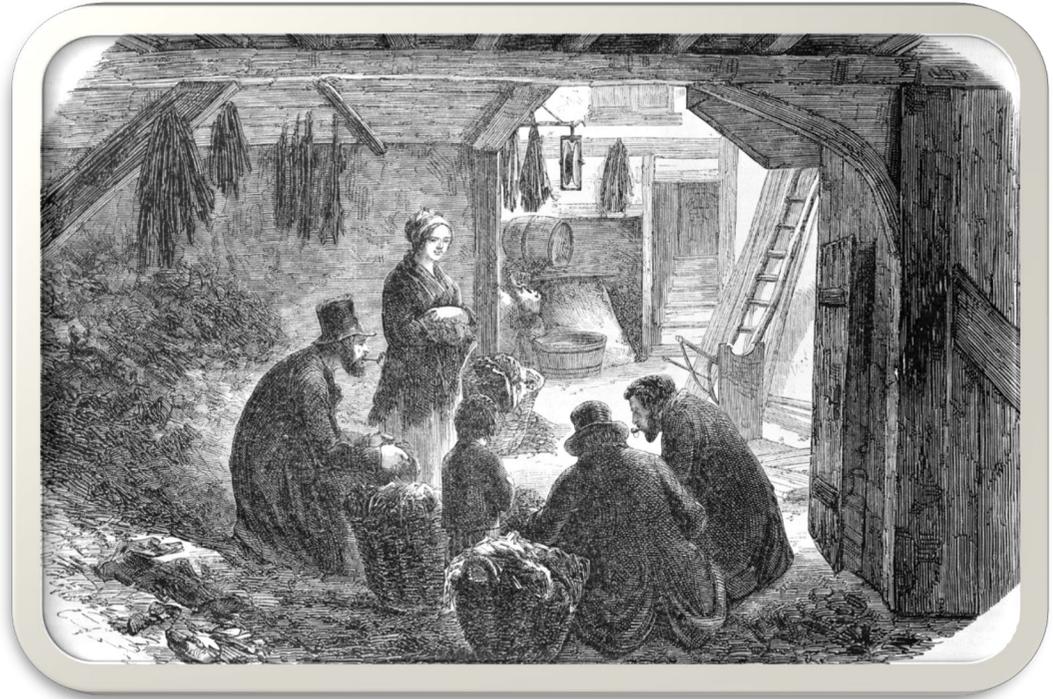
...were those that had been discarded by the upper classes once they showed wear, or were replaced with the latest style.

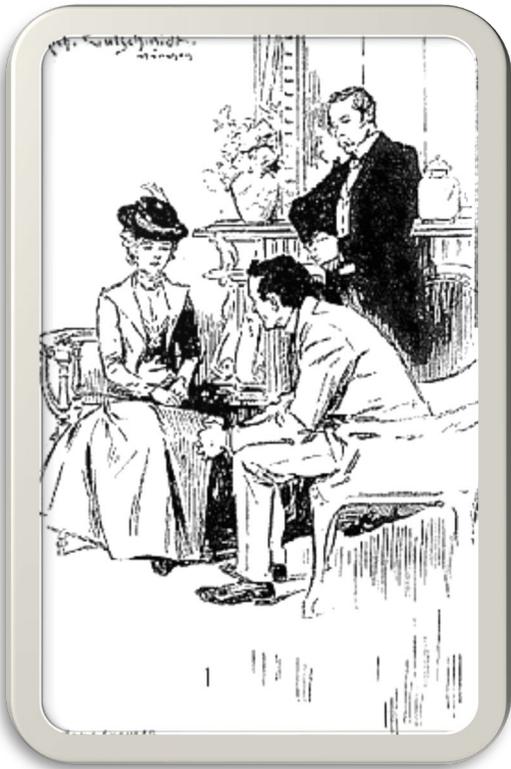


*When a dress was no longer in fashion,
a lady would pass it on to her maid, who
might remake it or pass it on to another
servant for the "ragbag."*

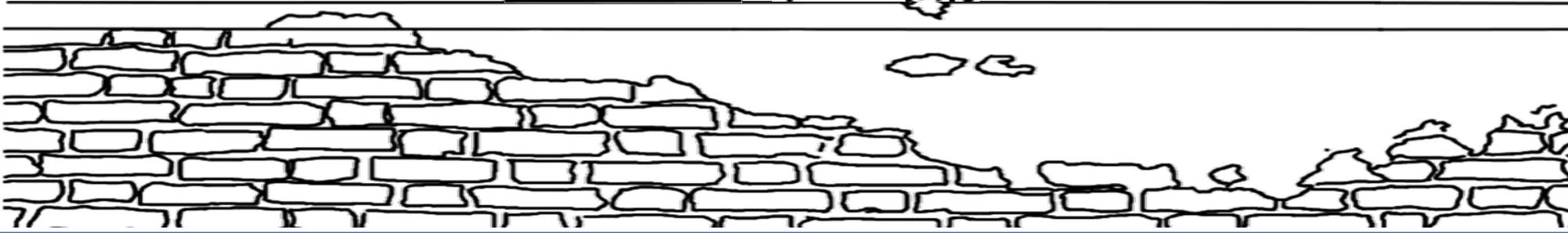


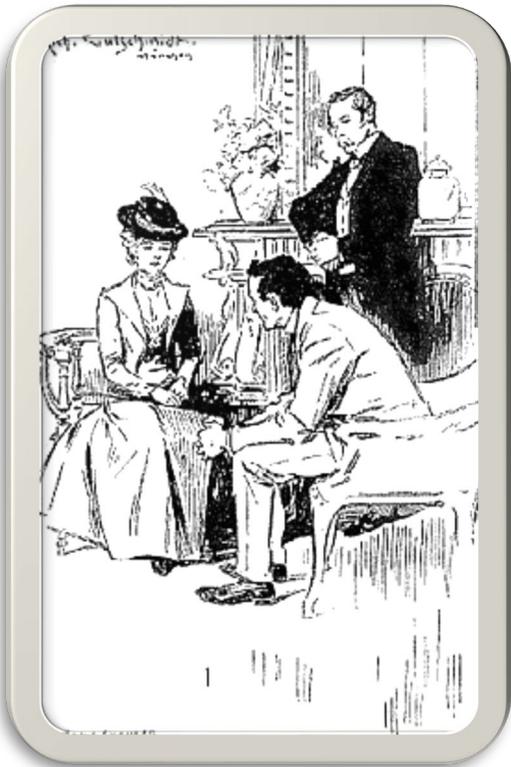
*Either way, many made it
into the second-hand
clothing trade.*



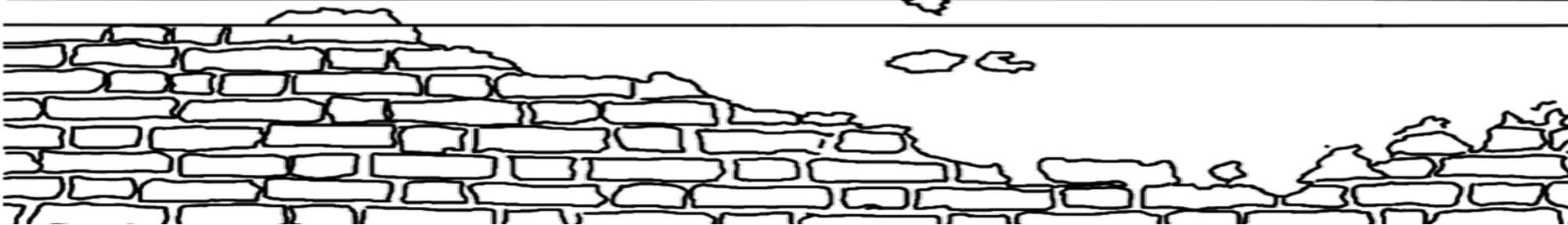


Such purchases allowed those with lower incomes to maintain a "respectable appearance" above their economic level.





Interestingly, clothing was the item most often stolen during the Victorian period.



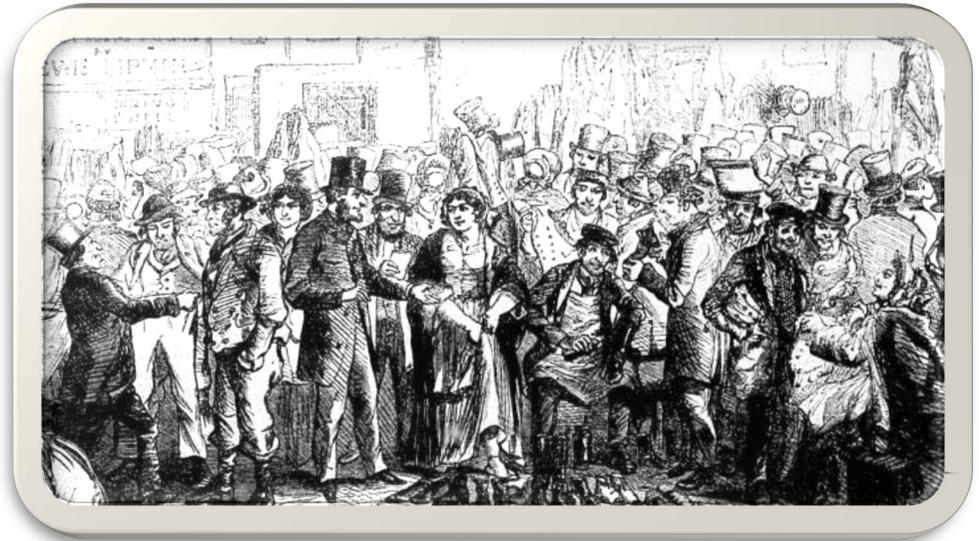
Seamstresses would sell the items they had been paid to alter, or laundresses those they were to wash.



In addition to second-hand clothing, some purchases were made at "slop-shops," where cheap, ready-made clothes were sold.



The term "slop" referred to ready-made breeches worn by sailors but became associated with any "off the rack" item.



*With the introduction of
the band-saw to cut
multiple garment pieces at
the same time...*



...the ready-to-wear clothing industry began to affect the income of skilled dressmakers.



Manufacturers of such mass-produced items would hire women to stitch together garments for piece-rate wages.





These sweat-shop workers often labored 14-18 hours a day in their homes for below-subsistence earnings.

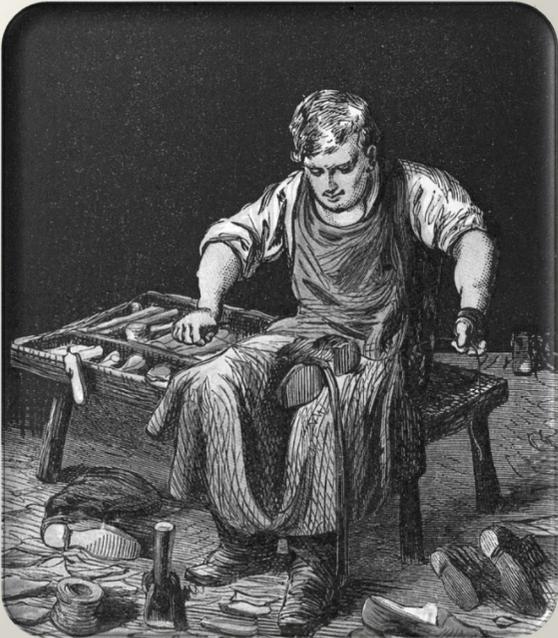




Most of these items were shipped to the US to supply immigrant populations there. These were often ill-fitting, but serviceable.



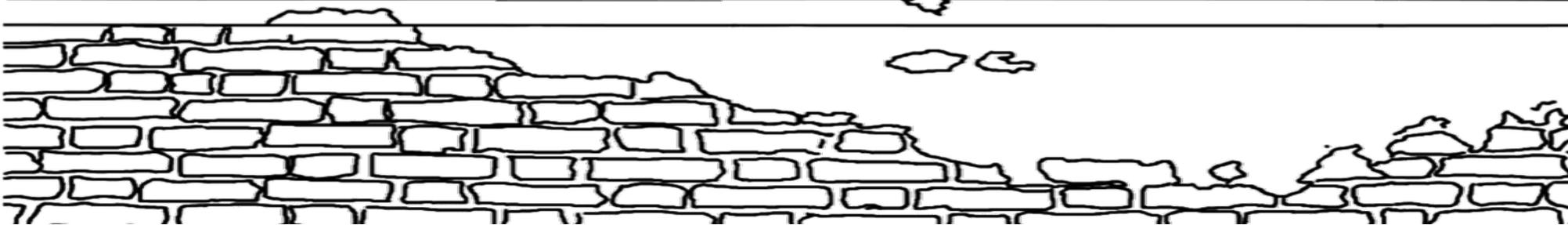
In addition to seamstresses, others involved in the clothing trade were "cobblers, tailors, dressmakers..., milliners, mantua makers, hatters, importers, shop girls, weavers, dyers, and textile workers."



Altogether, this industry was the second largest employer of women in England (the first being domestic service).



In part, because the work was considered "respectable" as it often involved needlework — a skill considered within a woman's sphere.



During his efforts to solve "The Adventure of Silver Blaze," Holmes finds a Bond Street milliner's bill for more than thirty-seven pounds...

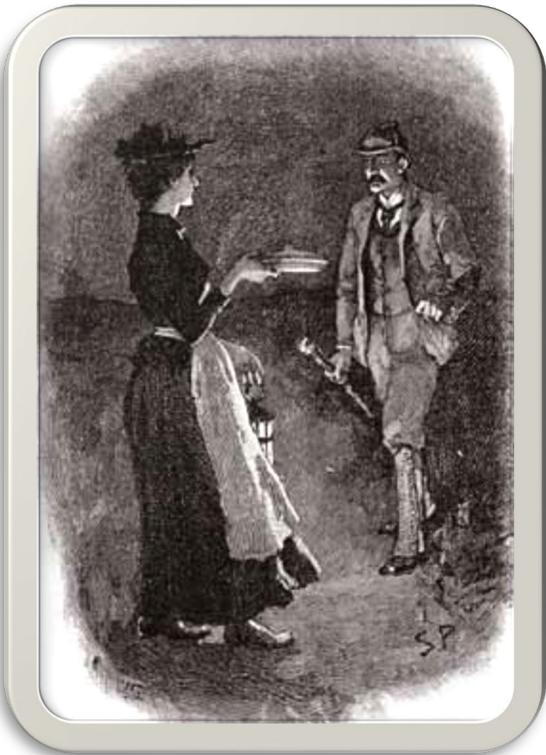


*...a rather hefty sum and
not something that a
servant — or horse
trainer — could afford.*

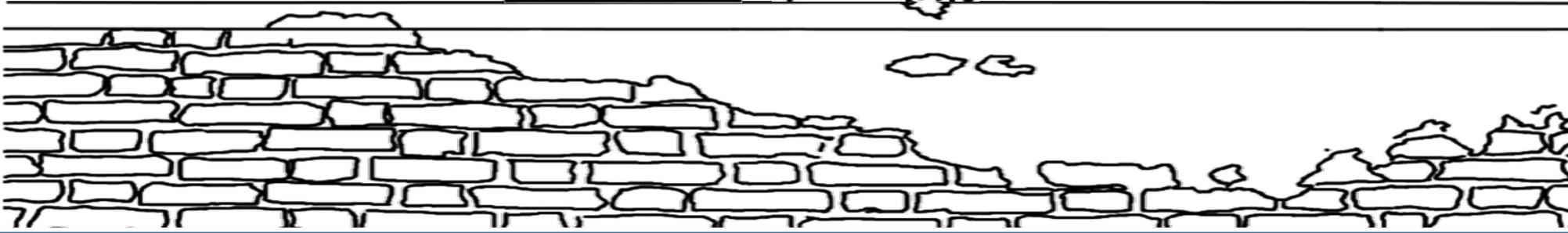


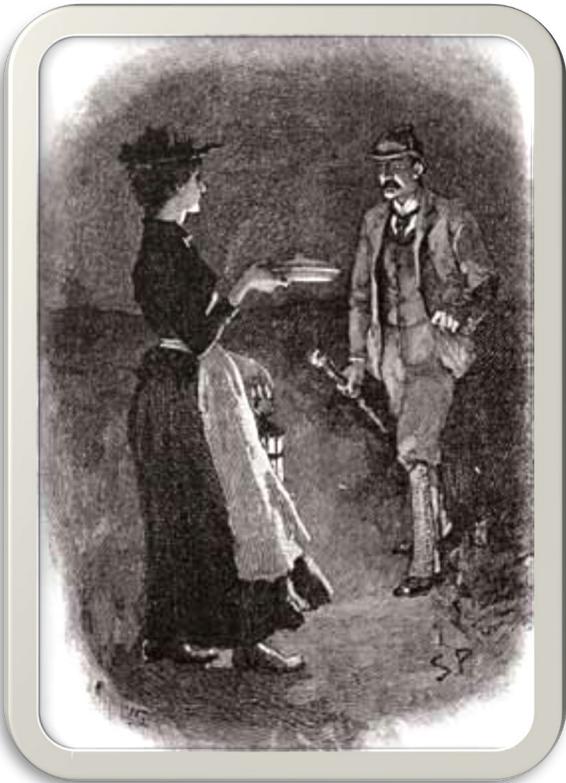
A visit to the dress and hat maker confirmed the identity of the purchaser and a second woman in Straker's life.





If only she'd been less inclined to keeping up with fashions, Straker might have been spared his life.





In this case, Sherlock uncovered the answer to "where did you get that dress?"



*So we have completed
topic # 076 in our
series...*

*Yes, but we'll be back
with another topic
soon...*



Original Source Material for this topic:

- 1) Sally Mitchell *Daily Life in Victorian England*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996, pp 133-134.
- 2) Sally Mitchell (editor), *Victorian Britain: An Encyclopedia*. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1988, page 175.
- 3) Daniel Pool, *What Jane Austen Ate and What Charles Dickens Knew*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993, page 215.
- 4) Clare Rose, *Making, Selling and Wearing Boys' Clothes in Late-Victorian England*. Farnham, UK: Ashgate Publishing, 2010, pp. 113-114.
- 5) Beverly Lemire, "Consumerism in Preindustrial and Early Industrial England: The Trade in Secondhand Clothes." *Journal of British Studies*, vol. 27, no. 1, 1988, pp. 1-24.
- 6) Kellow Chesney, *The Victorian Underworld*, New York: Schocken Books, 1972, page 189.
- 7) https://www.fashion-era.com/shopping_in_the_past.htm#Cheap%20Slop%20Work%20Clothes
- 8) https://www.fashion-era.com/victorian_occupations_wojtczak.htm



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IS CREATED THROUGH THE INGENUITY & HARD WORK OF:

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