**The Theatrical Ladies Guild**

In 1891 Kittie Carson, the celebrated actress, became concerned at the distress that she had observed amongst certain individuals connected with her profession who, through no fault of their own, found themselves out of work with the winter months approaching. The lesser members of her profession, especially those with touring companies, had a particularly hard time of it, often not knowing when one engagement would end or the next would begin. Living from hand to mouth, they had little opportunity to build up savings against the hard times, and when forced to stop working through illness or maternity could quickly find themselves in dire circumstances. It was these latter cases that Mrs. Carson was particularly concerned about, and so she took it upon herself to found a relief organisation to come to their aid. Consequently, on the 13th November 1891, she gathered together a number of her esteemed friends at her home at 48 Great Russell Street, London, to discuss her proposals.

Her speech to the ladies there gathered opened as follows:

*For some time past I have been very grieved to hear of many sad cases of distress among our sisters in the profession, and had worried my brains in attempting to find out a method whereby similar cases might be relieved. After much thought and inquiry, I hit upon what I thought to be a good plan. The distress to which I allude is that which of necessity attends any poor married woman during the period of maternity. We do not hear much about these cases in London, but in the provinces there is, I am sorry to say, much sad trouble. During such illness a woman is helpless. All her little stock of money is going out, and frequently none is coming in. Our less fortunate sisters connected with the stage have frequently to live from hand to mouth. How is it possible for them to save for the day of trouble? Sisters in art! why, let the poor woman be actress, chorister, extra, dresser, or cleaner, she equally deserves our warmest sympathy, and, what is more effective, our aid.*

and went on to outline her plans as follows:

*Well friends, after considering all these things I put on my thinking cap, and said to myself, "You fortunately have a large circle of warm-hearted friends, why not put the whole affair before them and ask their advice? The scheme is too big for you to carry out yourself." I had a chat with Miss Katie James, and I thank her sincerely for the valuable hints she gave me. Then I talked over the subject with all the friends with whom I came in contact, and afterwards I planned a way whereby I thought my scheme could be carried out. It is this - that on certain days those willing to help me should meet at my house and assist in the making of garments necessary to newly-born children. That this clothing should be made up in parcels or bags, and that bags should be forwarded to her.*

As instigator of the organisation, Mrs. Carson was unanimously voted as its inaugural President but declined the honour, offering herself instead as Honorary Secretary and Treasurer, which was unanimously voted and carried. Miss Fanny Brough subsequently became the first President (a post she held for many years) with Miss Katie James as Vice President, and a motion was put forward and carried that the society should call itself "The Theatrical Ladies Guild". Amongst the rules passed by the Guild were that:

* Every Member pay one shilling a year and contribute at least two articles of clothing for one child.
* That each member of the committee pay one guinea per year (one pound and one shilling) and contribute two articles of clothing.
* That only those who have been in receipt of a salary from a manager should be entitled to serve upon the Committee.
* That absolute secrecy be observed regarding the names of those applying to the Guild for aid.

Of course, the sum raised by this small group of actresses was not initially very large, and so it was decided to hold weekly 'Sewing Bees' to make warm clothing for those temporarily out of work. At the earliest of these events about a dozen ladies gathered in Mrs. Carson's daintily little drawing room, which she had volunteered for the purpose. But soon the numbers grew so that Kittie had to begin removing her regular furniture from that room to accommodate extra chairs for all the ladies attending. The work would generally begin at around three o'clock in the afternoon, with an interruption for tea around four o'clock generously provided by their gracious host.


*Guild members at a Sewing Bee*

An anonymous diarist reflecting on those days remarked:

*I often look back on those first Bee meetings in Great Russell Street as some of the happiest hours my life has known. We were so hospitably treated, and yet had the best that was in us in the way of industry brought out by the founder's own example of industry.*

As the numbers continued to swell, Kitty had to host the overflow in her dining room until the numbers became so great that she could not possibly accommodate them all, and alternate premises had to be found. A further problem was that of housing the ever increasing volume of clothing donated and/or stitched together by the Guild's members. To accommodate these needs, premises were taken in Wellington Street, Covent Garden.

In 1895, the manufacturing of clothes became the province of 'The Stage Needlework Guild', founded by Miss Lousie Stopford as a branch of the Theatrical Ladies' Guild. Its object was solely the manufacture and supply of clothing - for purposes of distribution it then handed the finished garments, following an exhibition usually held in December, over to the Theatrical Ladies' Guild who would then decide upon the recipients. Miss Stopford became its first President, and there were unlimited vice-presidents - the only qualification for such a position being an undertaking to find at least five new associate members. All members were required to contribute at least two new useful garments per year (purchased or manufactured) and pay a subscription of at least sixpence per year to cover administrative expenses. Alternatively, members, including men, could become associates by contributing at least two shillings and sixpence per year which would be used to purchase items which the women could not readily make (such as blankets, etc.). Over the years this organisation provided many thousands of items of clothing for distribution. In 1913 alone, the last full year of operation before the outbreak of war, the Needlework Guild supplied 4,718 garments to the Theatrical Ladies' Guild.

Before long the guild had outgrown the premises at Wellington Street and relocated to Russell Street, Covent Garden, then to spacious premises close to its roots at 90 Great Russell Street. It must have gladdened the heart of Mrs. Carson to see the tireless work carrying on on her own doorstep although by then she had been forced to retire from the committee through overstrain.

  
*Cast off clothing department*

By this time the Guild had become a vital and highly respected beneficent society which could boast some of the most popular names of the London Stage amongst its members: Lena Ashwell, Lillian Braithwaite, Eva Moore and Irene Vanbrugh to name but a few that appear amongst these pages (the full list is much longer).

Although originally set up primarily to help maternity cases, its aims had soon broadened to encompass the provision of clothing, for stage or private use, for the poorer members (men, women and children) of the theatrical profession, and of the working staff of the London and provincial theatres. It also threw its doors open for membership to ladies not connected with the theatrical profession who, on the payment of an annual subscription of two shillings and sixpence, could then attend the regular sewing bees at the Guild's office.

Upon Mrs. Carson's retirement as Secretary that post was then taken up by Miss Millicent Hammond, who had previous experience of that line of work with the Charity Organisation Society. The function of the Secretary was to screen applications submitted to the Guild before placing in front of the committee all of the particulars of the genuinely deserving cases. This was a necessity since the committee members were all busy women with little time to spend on anything outside of the theatre. Furthermore, whilst it was the Guild's desire to assist all deserving cases, their resources were not unlimited and it was necessary to ensure that they were not being exploited by false applications. Initially, the Guild restricted its aid to clothing, coal (for heating), and soup and bread tickets - although money also would sometimes be granted in exceptional cases.

Over the years the Guild has continued to grow and widen its scope and has assisted thousands of worthy individuals through their darkest hours. In 2001 the Guild changed its name to *The Theatre Guild* to overcome misconceptions that it provided aid for women only.

Today, through the form of regular and/or one-off grants it regularly helps:

* Those who are unable to manage through ill health, such as Cancer, Stroke, Parkinson’s and Aids or facing trauma due to accidents.
* Pensioners, to enable them to maintain their independence.
* Those who needs help with nursing fees either at home or in a Nursing Home.
* Working members of the profession in special cases of emergency.
* One-parent families who are prevented from accepting a job due to the cost of childcare.

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