

THE ANTIDOTE

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OUR RAIMENT.

Whence do we get our clothing? Not the actual garments, the Ulster, the Mackintosh or Melissa coat, the box overcoat, the Astrachan, or the otter-trimmed, but the inspiration and the device; not the detailed parts, but the system, the stupendous whole? Who make the laws which appoint whether or no we are to have lung disease or sore throat, or indigestion, or headache, or corns, whether or no we are to shiver succinct in winter, whether or no to melt within air-tight envelopes in the dog-days, whether or no our women are to take out door exercise on muddy or stormy days, whether or no our children are to run and romp at their sports? Our tailors and dress makers recite and enforce the laws of the hour, but they are not responsible for them.

Sometimes even when these laws are bad for trade as well as for comfort and beauty they bemoan them with us. Our young gentlemen and gentlewomen in the public thoroughfares, parks, or avenues teach them by the practice that is better than precept and with the security of the unmistakably orthodox—they still venture upon small eccentricities and innovations, on an extra button, a braid the less, an unprecedented flounce, a remnant or retrogressive sleeve, which forthwith become authoritative like the rulings of our judges, but they are without real control, and indeed without real independence—they would be powerless to abolish the chimney-pot hat for male heads, or to institute "garmenture of dual form" for female legs. They cannot even, without falling hopelessly from their high estate of fashionable empire, without incurring all the pains and penalties that would visit mere Jones, resist the customs that impose the one and forbid the other.

The common public, by whose resolute and careless adhesion the whole code, like many a better and many a worse is maintained and rendered compulsory, has no originating voice in the matter, and does not even ask to have any; it wonders and obeys, with an obedience whose unanimity is command itself. Have the various mysteries in which man (especially woman) is made awkward and uncomfortable, pre-existed for ever in the world of ideas, are they necessary developments which through whatever strangeness and whatever disturbances, must come of what has been, and must go on to what will be, and whose course we human things can only follow while we dream that we guide?

Or does a fashion sprout up like a plant, whose seed a chance bird has dropped irrelevantly into a careless corner where the soil happens to fit, and which grows to an ineradicable consistency or to a day's ephemeral freshness according, not to its use or desirableness in anybody's eyes, but to the pertinacity with which nature has endowed it.

But if there are, hidden behind a veil of mystery, secret rulers, mute and glorious Alexanders, Napoleons, and Bismarcks, who conquer and rule the world of clothes, not simply following its events, but administering its government constitutionally, what a power these beings hold. The influence upon us of our clothes is incalculable. Let anyone imagine himself normally clad in the garb of another civilisation or another period, in the flowing splendours of eastern luxury, in a courtly watteau costume of rose-coloured satin and damask, or in a toga, or in a buff jerkin, and ask himself whether he could then be in his habits of life, his manners, his gait, even his language and his thoughts, the same person as the hurried, practical, unceremonious, every day man of an every day world that he finds himself now. You might change a man's whole nature by changing the nature of his dress.

Perhaps that is how women have acquired their traditional reputation for instability. The variations in their fashions are too radical as well as too frequent for them to retain a settled

disposition. What unanimity of purpose is to be expected from a creature who has no sooner become accustomed to the brisk step and to the disembarrassed motion of the upper part of the body which belong to a fashion of short frocks, than she has to adopt the dragging gliding gait and compressed steadiness of arms and hands busy in holding up the drooping edge attendant to a long train epoch, then is back again to the short frocks, and then doubtless to the train again? How can she make permanently hers either the decision and vivacity which arise from the habit of unimpeded motion, or the dignity and elegance which would agree with stately and difficult walking amid drooping yards of stately magnificence? What steadiness can there be in her politics or her ethics, or her aesthetics when Marie Antoinette and Charlotte Corday, the Marquise of Pompadour and Queen Anne, the Roman matrons of the Appian Road tombstones and the Parisian matrons of the First Empire, the demonstrative court beauties of Lely and pre-Raphaelite damsels in long straight folds, the Gainsboroughs, the Reynoldses, the Firths, the Vanduykes, the Watteaus, and so on,—the swathed mummies of one historic period and the petticoated hogsheads of another, the Japanese Princesses, Swiss peasants, etc., are all in turn assigned to her as her models?

Comparatively speaking, men's fashions do not vary, a long while ago destiny produced the present combination. It is hideous, but is fairly serviceable, and successive generations are content to grumble and to wear it with ups and downs of waists, and widenings and skimpings of sleeves and trouser-legs, but no serious alterations for good or bad. The natural results have followed, men have become perhaps duller and steadier. Doubtless dandyism and vanity are not wholly extinct, but who could be a fop of the Beau Nash order in such rough and ready garments? Men are decently civil to their lady friends and cheery to each other, but courtesies and compliments are to a great extent a thing of the past.

There are no loungers now; every man, whatever his station, goes about possessed of the idea that he is meant