

Collier's

JUNE 10, 1955

That Friend of Your Wife's Named DIOR

His aim is

"to save women from nature."

*—No highway engineer ever flattened
a curve more ruthlessly*

By **RICHARD DONOVAN**



What's in the cards for next year?

His mind on the future, Dior

relaxes with a game of solitaire

MONSIEUR CHRISTIAN DIOR, the stout and startled-looking grand vizier of the high-fashion Paris dressmakers, is the main reason most women look the way they do today. Despite that fact, he is a good man. M. Dior does not swear, smoke, exercise, gossip cruelly or indulge in exotic public behavior. He sends flowers to his needleworkers and gives them short talks on harmony and rectitude. Although alive with tensions himself, he is said to have rescued several even more jumpy little old ladies from the jaws of Paris traffic. He is so kind to animals and birds that he was unable to kill a goose given him for a Christmas dinner eight years ago, and has it still, honking around his country place near Cannes in the vapors and rages of extreme old age.

The greatest of all M. Dior's virtues, of course, is his burning desire to make all women look beautiful. "My dream," he says, "is to save them from nature."

OldMagazineArticles.com



Gowns are fitted to exact measurements of models who will wear them in the twice-yearly fashion show. Here M. Dior uses Malacca stick to point out a defect to production boss Mme. Marguerite and assistant M. Paul

With such a heart-warming ambition, surely recititudinous, goose-loving M. Dior has a right to expect an equally heart-warming response from the world. But no. However earnestly he sews good will, his chief crop always turns out to be violent controversy.

Last January, for example, after making a chance remark about the unsightliness of women's knees, he was castigated on the front pages of five continents. Before that, his helpful attempt to round down the warlike feminine bustline caused a hideous international Flat Look uproar. Long before that, when he was crossing the U.S. in 1947 after introducing his then explosive New Look, he was picketed in Chicago. Fortunately, he looked so much like a small-town Midwestern savings-and-loan official that he walked from his hotel unrecognized and got mixed up in the picket line for some moments, thinking it a fire drill.

Wherever M. Dior turns his hand, unrest seems to ensue.



Dressing room is tense spot while show is in progress. Dior calls gown in foreground Fête du Printemps

Just a few months ago, to cite one reported case, he sold one of his "structural" ballroom gowns to the wife of a Belgian. The gown was an extremely heavy creation, braced with wires and bone stays. Soon after delivery, he got a note from the wife saying the gown had made her deliriously happy. Soon after that, he got a note from the Belgian saying he had ordered the gown, and his wife, out of his house. Every time he waltzed with his wife, complained the Belgian, the centrifugal pull of the weighted garment set the two of them whirling uncontrollably. Not only that but he couldn't feel her through the gown.

"It was like grasping a bird cage," he said.

This complaint may seem a little eccentric at first glance. Nevertheless, it is very important, for it bears directly on the great problem of M. Dior's



The show. Seats cost up to \$1,000, credited against purchases. Name of this gown: Accroche Coeur

life. He is charged with unintentionally worsening relations between the sexes. More and more, as his fashion designs are copied all the way down the international garment line to the mass-produced \$3.95 house dresses, he causes thousands of women to rush out and buy new clothes, thus aggravating thousands of men. "Without question," says a rival Paris dressmaker, "dear Christian is the outstanding *agent provocateur* of domestic schisms. No other world leader can make that claim."

That is interesting theory. But the fact about these schisms seems to be that the man-in-the-street, not women or even M. Dior, is at the real bottom of them. M. Dior and the majority of women get along fine. When he orders a new look, they look new. There is little malingering. Men, on the other hand, not only refuse flatly to look new themselves; they put up the most sullen and loutish resistance to any little change in the appearance of women.

What is behind this masculine attitude is not known. According to a Los Angeles psychologist the cause may be mass fear. Most men are not poets, says this expert; they wrench their dreams out of the street—secretly, at noonday, from the jolly-bosomed spectacle of the working girls, bounding to lunch. Obviously, therefore, when some unseen and seemingly ruthless foreign power like M. Dior loftily decrees that waists, hips, busts, everything must be abolished in a coming season, terror of a widespread and deep-seated nature gets to work at once among the male population.

How Men React to His Style Changes

Reactions to this terror, or Dior phobia, differ among men, according to other observers. Sometimes a sudden fashion change sets them whining and hollering. Sometimes they fall into a general listlessness and melancholia. If the situation is really bad, the victims characteristically begin writing letters to M. Dior. There are so many such cases that he hardly dares look at his correspondence any more. For every letter of affection from women, he gets two or three of challenge or abuse from men.

In his hushed and handsomely decorated Paris office one recent morning, fifty-year-old M. Dior had a typical go at the mail. Standing five feet nine in a drab, three-button business suit, the light gleaming on his bald head, his discreet bay window rising and falling nervously and his sensitive, large-nosed face wearing a perpetually surprised expression—as though he had just sat on a pencil sharpener—M. Dior braced himself and tore open the first letter.

It was from a lady in Seattle. "You are a god-send," she wrote. "You waved your wand; suddenly I was young and hopeful again. I love you!"

The second letter was from a gentleman in Kansas. "Stay out of Topeka, you bum!" he began. M. Dior put that letter aside.

The third letter, from a gentleman in Idaho, said: "I want to make you a proposition. You have disfigured my wife with your genius . . . Why don't I send you the remains? She is about a size 46 . . ."

Needless to say, poor M. Dior read no further that morning. He had stretched forth his hand and it had come back covered with lipstick and tooth marks.

Now, if there is anything M. Dior does not want, it is this type of correspondence. Or any other form of controversy. He has enough problems; he has always preferred to remain relatively anonymous, for example. But from the hour in 1947 when he first opened his *maison de haute couture* at 30 Avenue Montaigne, in Paris, reporters have covered him as though he were a war. Now he finds himself in the lamentable position of being a famous international figure.

The Little Salon That Grew and Grew

M. Dior never wanted to become a big business-



Needleworker, right, expresses high satisfaction with new Dior gown

man. Yet in eight years Maison Dior has grown inflexibly from a chaste little salon (three work-rooms, 70 workers) into the General Motors of high fashion (five buildings, more than 1,000 workers). "We have manufacturing branches in the United States, South America and many other places, and retail outlets in 27 regions, including Central Africa," said M. Dior, a while ago.

He was holding himself in. Last year, Maison Dior grossed \$15,000,000, an unheard-of take for high dressmaking. It accounted for around 66 per cent of the whole Paris *couture's* foreign export. In addition, M. Dior designed, manufactured or put his label on perfume, hosiery, hats, shoes, furs, gloves, bags, ties and other items, and fought off squads of promoters who wanted to paste the Christian Dior label on everything from bras-of-the-month to toenail polish.

As head of the largest world organization ever built by a Paris *grand couturier*, M. Dior not only finds himself a big businessman, he is in the even more bizarre position of being the chief idea man and motive force of the entire frenetic, international female fashion industry.

When a new Dior idea sets women in motion toward stores, not only do the workers at Maison Dior find themselves with more work than they can handle but the whole Paris *couture*, numbering some 57 houses, begins to vibrate—following, fighting or conspicuously ignoring the trend. Then, the world-wide corset and brassière business, which will have to do the assault work in flogging reluctant nature into the new shape, promptly jumps in. The makers of hats, hose, shoes and other accessories joyfully follow. Fashion buyers and editors start flying the Atlantic; newspapers and magazines get set for ad bonanzas; from thousands of manufacturers and retail stores rise sighs of gratitude and relief. Then, like 10,000 calliopes, Seventh Avenue, New York, the great equalizer, bringing you Christian Dior and all those other hot *couturiers* at \$6.95, comes roaring up from the rear.

With all this power stacked against him, M. Dior hasn't a chance to put up effective resistance. He is fated to be a leader. A multibillion-dollar world industry teeters like a precariously balanced pyramid, point down, on his head.

"If the U.S. industry had to put up one tenth of what Christian Dior is worth to it in making women throw away last year's dress," says an official of one of this nation's largest department stores, "it would have to pay him around twenty million dollars a year."

Unfortunately, considering his troubles, M. Dior doesn't make \$20,000,000 a year. In fact, he doesn't own his business. Marcel Boussac, the French textile king who started M. Dior going on his own in 1947 with an investment of \$500,000, owns Christian Dior, Paris, Christian Dior, Caracas, and Christian Dior, New York. Most of M. Dior's shoe, hosiery and other tie-ups, to which he rents his label, pay the house, which is to say, Boussac. The monsieur may indeed be worth \$20,000,000 a year. But his take is \$100,000, virtually all of it in salary.

M. Dior feels he is a case of mistaken identity. The press and public may be convinced that he is "the most incisive, daring and influential figure ever to appear on the high-fashion scene"; "a tyrant of the hemlines," and so on. In fact, however, he is a shy, emotional, dreamy and superstitious Ferdinand of the hemlines whose often expressed wish is to retire into a small, elegant, low-pressure establishment of high fashion.

"All the *patron* really wants," says one of his closest associates, "is to create a few \$2,500-and-up gowns a year for ladies of the highest discernment and financial backing. I have never seen such a retiring personality in so prominent a man."

Sweeping as it is, this statement seems to have some fact to it. M. Dior's whole life is a study in withdrawal. A moody, taciturn child, from his own report, he spent most of his early childhood alone, wandering the gardens of his family home at Granville, in coastal Normandy.

When his family moved to Paris, neither his

schoolmates, his brother and two sisters, his well-to-do parents nor the beckoning world could draw him out very much. "Part of me retired at the age of five," he says.

At seventeen, when M. Dior finally emerged into Paris as a top-hatted, velvet-collared young gentleman of means and introverted charm, the ladies got set for siege. But the only serious scuffle he gave them, he says, was in ballroom dancing.

M. Dior's father, a practical manufacturer of fertilizer, among other products, wanted him to become a diplomat. But that calling involved con-



A successful showing for the press— and **Dior** accepts the congratulations of noted fashion reporter Virginia Pope, assistant M. Paul, and good friend Carmel Snow, editor of Harper's Bazaar



"Merveilleux!" The new Dior line is a hit—and women everywhere will be flatter than ever

troversy. M. Dior turned to quieter studies—architecture and musical composition. When he showed no marked talent for either pursuit, he tried painting, and when he showed no marked talent for that, his father helped set him up in an art store. But M. Dior was even less of a salesman.

“When a customer wanted to buy a picture I liked,” he recalls, “I ran it down until the customer went away.”

Gradually, as he got older and older without settling into any form of gainful work, it became apparent to M. Dior’s family and friends that he might have withdrawn too far. M. Dior felt fine, however. He was bright and witty in a subdued way, according to his old friends. He was a wonderful guest. Had he not had a bad accident when he was twenty-seven, he might today be one of the most charming and uncontroversial of all the well-heeled ne’er-do-wells of Paris.

The accident was that his father suddenly lost all his money. Immediately, the unrest that was later to dog the younger M. Dior set in. M. Dior hunted and was refused work as an insurance salesman, a baker, an office boy. For two years, he lived at the homes of Paris friends, eating an average of one meal a day. One morning, he could not get out of bed. The doctor said he was very sick from malnutrition. It was 1934; M. Dior was twenty-nine.

His First Try at Fashion Sketching

One of the interesting characteristics of M. Dior is that he can be quirky. Instead of despairing at the sanatorium where his friends sent him, he cheered up, recovered rapidly and began to sketch and sew tapestries—the only needlework he has ever done. But back in Paris, he had another accident. The tapestries sold. Instead of lying low, he listened to friends in the *couture* who urged him to try fashion sketching. He drew some sketches and they sold, for around \$2.50 apiece. He was amazed. Little by little, never suspecting what lay ahead, he was drawn into the *couture*.

“Later on, after I had withdrawn into the house of Robert Piguet as a salaried designer,” M. Dior says, “war broke out and the army put me on a railroad track gang. I was known as the worst-dressed soldier in the transportation corps. My leggings always came unwrapped.”

M. Dior got his last chance to remain a happy, anonymous artisan some months after his discharge when the renowned Lucien Lelong hired him, along with the now famed Pierre Balmain, as one of his top designers. M. Dior threw the chance away. When Balmain left to establish his own house, M. Dior also ventured out gingerly for a look around. Then he ran into M. Boussac and the damage was done. M. Dior went into business for himself.

A Celebrity Who Shuns the Spotlight

Today, as a world celebrity, M. Dior finds retreat into his lost anonymity cut off. But he keeps trying. He does not know his Paris neighbors, who have lived wall-to-wall with him for three and a half years. Although he is the foremost decorator of women, he clothes himself to fade into the Paris scenery, which is mostly gray. He wears no jewelry or other attention-getters, except the little red lapel ribbon of the *Légion d’Honneur*, awarded him by his grateful government for rescuing the *couture* from its postwar doldrums with his New Look. Even in slumber, he often withdraws his head under the covers.

“Sleep,” he says, “is your best friend.”

A fugitive from the machine age, he cannot drive a car or handle clocks or fountain pens very long without breaking them. He will not have television in his house. “It throngs the place with strangers,” he says. He knows that sports and group games exist but he plays only canasta, at which he is very good, and solitaire, at which he is, naturally, better. A monarchist in politics, he feels France would be better off if it still had a king; a traditionalist in soul, he is often accused of trying to take fashion back to the bustle age.

M. Dior is a closemouthed man, as might be expected. He never makes a speech or discusses his private life, and rarely talks to reporters (although he was “born under the star of publicity,” in the phrase of his good friend Carmel Snow, editor of *Harper’s Bazaar*). He maintains the most stubborn secrecy about his customers, even though they are generally known to include Princess Margaret, the Duchess of Windsor, Gloria Swanson, Marlene Dietrich, Jane Russell and Zsa Zsa, among other majestic and famous ladies.

Because he has one of the world’s great views into the secrets of feminine nature, M. Dior has remained a bachelor. As such he comments on women only with reluctance. “I am very respectful of them,” he says.

M. Dior has reasons for this attitude. If he should have two or three dull collections in a row, the female world which now proclaims his genius and obeys his laws might suddenly tire of him and turn into millions of Madame Defarges, knitting malignantly while poor outmoded M. Dior rode by in a tumbrel to the guillotine.

“When I go into anonymity, I do not want women behind me, pushing,” says M. Dior. “I want to be behind myself.”

In the most guarded terms, M. Dior reveals that women are most fascinating between the ages of thirty-five and forty—"after they have won a few races and know how to pace themselves. Since few women ever pass forty," he says, "maximum fascination can continue indefinitely.

"I rarely design anything but wedding gowns for young girls," M. Dior adds. "A woman does not really need chic until the animal has lost some of its spring and the mind begins to prowl. That is the time for masking. *Merveilleux!*"

As an apprentice recluse, M. Dior rarely goes out to the opera, plays or even to the movies. Most of his nonbusiness life centers either in his beautiful seventeenth-century French farmhouse at Milly (about 20 miles south of Paris), his even more beautiful eighteenth-century French farmhouse near Cannes or his great three-story, graystone nineteenth-century town house on Paris' fashionable Boulevard Jules Sandeau.

Exquisite Décor of the Town House

The town house is his base of operations. It is staffed by a butler, valet, maid, cook and chauffeur. With its spiraling white-marble staircase and its dozen richly decorated rooms, it is probably one of the most beautiful homes in the world. M. Dior has the traditionalist's deep attachment to it.

"Whenever I'm away from home," he says, "I long for my old stones."

Except for weekends, when he is usually driven to one of his country places, M. Dior entertains three out of five evenings a week—always at home. The entertainment consists mainly of conversation with his intimate friends, including composer Darius Milhaud, poet-playwright-movie-maker Jean Cocteau, painter Sir Francis Rose and ex-Ambassador and Madame Henri Bonnet. Marlene Dietrich is a frequent caller when she is abroad.

On workdays, M. Dior is roused in his canopied Louis XVI bed by his valet. After breakfasting and reading the paper in bed, the monsieur reclines in his antique bathtub for some 15 minutes, dresses himself in one of 20 funereal suits and runs a gourmet's eye over the cook's lunch and dinner menus.

If the weather is bad, M. Dior bundles up in a heavy overcoat and scarf and leaves for work, hatless and hairless. His chauffeur whisks him through terrifying Paris traffic in his black Citroën sedan. He enters his sprawling *maison* at a side entrance, ascends in a creaky elevator and walks toward his office. Automatically, he begins to tense up.

The Model in the Mink-Lined Raincoat

Maison Dior is such a concentration of gray-toned, thickly carpeted, mirrored and chandeliered elegance, alive with so many nimble, dark-eyed, musical-voiced and exquisitely chic salesladies in black dresses that sales resistance is hard to achieve within its walls. Here is a gown for \$2,000 (14 per cent off if paid for in dollars); there is a suit that would make a down payment on a house. A tall Eurasian model, moving with the fast, skirt-twirling walk M. Dior has taught her, demonstrates a mink-lined raincoat for a customer from Brazil. Behind the customer hangs a kind of end-all of high fashion—a mink-lined mink.

The only arresting item missing from the scene is M. Dior himself. Upstairs, trapped in his office, trying desperately to keep ahead of female fashion desire around the world, *le grand monsieur* sits shooting out tensions so powerful they can be felt by sensitive employees on the first floor.

No man has a better right to tensions than M. Dior. Twice every year, his organization is wound up tighter and tighter as it struggles to create new collections. Then, in February and August when the collections are shown, the tensions are released with a frightful twang, only to begin all over again.

At the center, the mainspring, M. Dior, is always wound tighter than anybody. The first reason for his tension is that he has to think creatively, a nerve-racking business. To begin with, he has to find design ideas, usually in unlikely places.

"The idea for the full skirt in my New Look came to me while I studied the heaving hipline of a female Paris fishmonger," M. Dior says. "The New Look is based on her work skirt."

Once the monsieur has an idea, working it out can be even more nerve-racking. An aircraft designer may sit weeks pondering every millimeter of a wing section, shaping it for more lift in his mind's eye. But when M. Dior wants more lift out of a section, what does he have to sit and ponder for weeks in his mind's eye?

"Buzzums!" he says, nervously.

The second reason for M. Dior's tension is fashion itself. Fashion is basically emotion.

"To manufacture emotion," says M. Dior, "a man must have a working agreement with madness." He apparently has such an agreement. After he has thought how to move portions of the female anatomy around to form silhouettes that will be mistaken everywhere for new ones, M. Dior must then transmit the thoughts to paper.

Sketching is probably the only part of the dress-making process that gives him real pleasure. It enables him to retire to his place near Cannes for a couple of weeks, completely cut off from the world except for his caretakers and Madame Ray-

monde, a warm, wise woman who is his constant companion and canasta partner, as well as a cornerstone of his organization. It also enables him to sit in the bathtub.

During one recent sketching session at his Cannes place, Madame Raymonde left the monsieur seated in the bath at 10:00 A.M., with coffee, paper and pencils at hand. She returned at two o'clock. Wrinkled up like a prune, M. Dior was still in the bath, which he had kept refilled with hot water. Some 100 sketches littered the floor.

When the sketches are finished, the winding of M. Dior's inner spring really begins. He returns to Paris and goes into conference with Madame Marguerite, his *première* or production chief, who has charge of Dior's 25 *ateliers*, or needleworkers' workrooms. About 200 of the best sketches are spread among the 25 sub-*premières*, whose workers immediately start making muslin mock-ups of them.

At this point, M. Dior is forced to come down out of his office. He walks around in a kind of druggist's smock, pointing out defects with a long Malacca stick. By the time work on the final creations is begun, showing day may be only a month away. Pressure mounts. Madame Raymonde is everywhere, soothing nerves, urging speed, urging perfection. M. Dior is also everywhere, pointing and whacking with his Malacca stick, dodging customers, alive with premonitions of disaster. As his inner spring tightens, the vibration gets into the needleworkers.

Not long ago, when he was about to twang, M. Dior found clumsy stitching in one workroom. "Pigs!" he cried, according to a witness. "I am being crucified!"

This harmless exclamation, directed at the ceiling, caused an overwrought junior needleworker, or "little hand," to back into a dressmaker's dummy. The dummy fell with a crash. The crash made M. Dior moan, as though he had been tapped with a bung starter. The moan caused the unhappy "little hand" to burst into tears. With a high-strung wail, a tall, elegant model standing nearby promptly clutched the roaring little one to her protective bosom and also burst into tears.

This action set off the entire roomful of nervous ladies, who instantly fell into one another's arms, raising such a heart-rending lamentation that other late-working ladies roundabout could not help running in and adding to it.

For a moment, Monsieur Dior, the absolute dictator who yearly bends multitudes to his will, stared about him with a stern expression. Then his chin began to wobble. Then he flung his arms impulsively around both the model and the "little hand," the master floodgates opened and *le grand couturier* joined the ladies in tears. Together, they rocked and roared.

Relaxing as such explosions may be to one and all, M. Dior always gets wound right up again. He has reasons.

Those Who Buy for Mass Reproduction

All over the world, the press, the buyers, the exclusive and mass retailers, and finally the millions of Madame Defarges, are waiting to see what he will come up with.

His heart is with his elegant private customers. But unfortunately, they buy only a few garments a year. The big buyers are professionals, more interested in M. Dior's style line than in his individual dresses. They represent huge dress manufacturers, on and off New York's Seventh Avenue, and buy the patterns, the idea, or the dresses themselves for simplified mass reproduction. They also buy the right to reproduce dresses for specialty shops and other outlets too numerous to set down here. They may pay up to \$2,000 for a gown.

In the United States, M. Dior's principal export market, a huge and complex fashion mechanism is set to start grinding out Dior ideas for the American woman in all brackets as soon as they are available.

Top fashion experts, like Ben Reig and Nettie Rosenstein, will attend M. Dior's showing, buy models they like (from \$750 up) and then "translate" them (add U.S. casualness) for the \$250 trade. Other "adaptors," like Suzy Perette, will also attend the showing, buy the same models and "translate" them for the assembly line all the way



The monsieur and two satisfied customers—Princess Olga, right, of the Yugoslav royal family (now deposed) and her daughter, Princess Elizabeth, wearing

Dior creations



The monsieur is a tense man, and the biannual showings in February and August leave him limp

down to the \$24.95 level. From the low-price "adaptor," the middle-bracket U.S. woman gets her first shot at a version of a Dior look.

Crouching behind the low-price "adaptors" is Seventh Avenue, that volatile and roaring canyon which really clothes Mrs. America. Seventh Ave-

nue is inhabited by many conscientious manufacturers who go to Paris and pay for their designs. It is also inhabited by pirates—the poor-woman's stay. The pirates never go to Paris. They wait until the perspiring "adaptors" get back and turn out their "translations," then go to stores and buy them for copying, or copy them off the racks, for sale at \$20 less.

Lower-class pirates then pirate the pirates and undersell them by \$20. At this point, larceny becomes wholesale, with pirates plundering plunderers amid cries of indignation until eventually what remains of poor, manhandled M. Dior's original design ends up on some giant rack at \$6.95 or less.

When the Critics Go to Work on Him

When M. Dior isn't plagued by pirates, he is plagued by critics. The critics insist he is trying to take women back to the hideous shapelessness of the 1920s—a proposition he denies with the greatest vigor. While pointing admiringly with one hand to the "sculptural" style of Napoleonic times (when ladies used to soak sheer garments with cologne to make them cling), some critics point censoriously with the other hand to M. Dior's ribbed and wired "structural" creations, claiming that he expects women to fit the creations, and not the other way around.

"Dior gowns are semirigid molds," says a Los Angeles dress manufacturer who regularly buys Dior patterns for reproduction. "He tries to pour women into them like wet plaster. But American women won't pour. The average American woman stands five feet three, weighs around 133 pounds, has a 35½-inch bust, a 29-inch waist and 39-inch hips. Try getting that into one of Dior's fuselages," he concludes—neglecting to add that the average U.S. woman never buys a Dior original, built to model measurements, but only a U.S. copy of it, thoughtfully let out here and there by domestic manufacturers in the national interest.

When poor M. Dior is not plagued by critics, he is plagued by out-and-out thieves (who differ from pirates in that they usually steal direct from M. Dior himself and not from some middleman). Thieves cost Maison Dior about one fourth its possible income every year. There are no workable copyright laws in any country to prevent the theft of a *couturier's* new design ideas, which are basically all he has to sell. Hence M. Dior's salons are always alive with larcenists, most of them women, who try to sketch garments surreptitiously at showings, photograph them with tiny cameras or have patterns sneaked out to them by confederates in the house.

Little thieves—usually Parisian dressmakers who can be fined up to 500,000 francs and jailed up to three years if they steal more than once—do not drive M. Dior's tensions up so much. It's the syndicate thieves who get him.

One syndicate device is simplicity itself. Suppose an exclusive shop, say in Zurich, is in league with a group of "model renters" in New York. The Zurich shop buys a Dior original at 100,000 francs, copies it in three hours and puts it on a plane to New York. The model renters buy the original for 50,000 francs; the Zurich shop sells its copy as the original, for 200,000 francs.

In New York, meanwhile, the model renters get busy renting out the original to dressmakers, 24 hours to a customer, at a price ranging up to \$200 per shot. The dressmakers feed their work into mass-distribution channels, turning a profit on volume. From one Dior original, almost everybody makes many times more than its creator made. And

in every city and town even the \$12.95 dress customer gets a version of Dior as soon as, or before, the manufacturers or retailers who have worked the straight ticket.

Critics, buyers and thieves are enough to create tension in any man's *maison*. But the unending necessity to have new collections ready for showing every February and August—to meet that inflexible biannual deadline—is the problem that has given M. Dior a nervous stomach, for which he has to gobble potions all the time.

In Paris, new Dior showings are said to outrank changes of premiers in excitement. Press speculation goes out to all Western nations to agitate the man-in-the-street. Such famed Dior competitors as Balenciaga, Balmain, Givenchy, Jacques Heim, Dessès and Madame Fath become unavailable for comment on the coming event.

Inside Maison Dior, on which a complete security blackout has been clamped (an employee can go to jail for deliberately leaking information about a new collection), the tension which has been gathering for six months becomes intense. Working scared, M. Dior makes new changes in gowns that may have been reworked 10 times. Voices are raised; tears flow; M. Dior's correspondence takes on a threatening tone. When he stops to rest, the monsieur himself has a trance-bound expression. What if the collection should fail?

It is that thought which unstrings urbane, deeply religious, even more deeply superstitious M. Dior. Even when he's relatively relaxed, he knocks wood all the time, carries amulets on his key chain and suffers the most hair-raising premonitions of ruin. Before showings, his need to know what is crouching in wait for him becomes so intense that he has to visit lady mediums for advance information. They always tell him everything is going to be all right and he always tenses up worse than ever.

One evening last January, shrouded in flickering candlelight in the parlors of a celebrated Paris medium, M. Dior watched anxiously while she worried the astral circuits. Contradictory statements and corrections kept coming in. Then—there it was. Great news! The new collection would be a big success and make wonderful headlines. Alive with apprehension, M. Dior flung himself into final preparation for his press showing, which was only four days away.

Two days before the showing, a reporter in Paris wrote a story totally unsupported by fact in which she said that M. Dior really intended to flatten women this time. "There will not be a curve left," she predicted dismally.

A Garage Man Who Had Dior Phobia

This speculation was bulletined internationally. In Los Angeles, O. B. Fenton, a garage proprietor who always got considerable spiritual uplift from the sight of his lady customers, read it on the day of M. Dior's press showing, and became violently incensed. Fenton, a lifelong man-in-the-street, who had been hit bad by the New Look and worse by the Flat Look, had Dior phobia of an advanced kind. He did not whine, nor fall into melancholia nor write letters. He astounded his wife by suddenly hollering: "I'll mangle the bum!"

About the time the garageman made this barbarous statement, there was a shriek in faraway Paris. Christian Dior, rushing around making last-minute changes before show time, had stuck a pin in his finger.

Nevertheless, the show had to go on. The elite of the world's fashion press were jammed into the glittering *grand salon* at Maison Dior. The non-elite were jammed into the hall and stairways—anywhere they might catch a glimpse of the dazzling new creations. In the *grand salon*, in one of the *fauteuils d'honneur* (best seats), Harper's Bazaar editor Carmel Snow (black suit, white hat) sat with a stern expression, flanked by Bazaar reporters. Iva Patcévitch, who publishes Vogue and is another great power in enforcing fashion conformity, waited cheerfully. Madame Henri Bonnet, one of the few celebrities admitted on press day, circulated exquisitely about. A murmur of many languages fell upon M. Dior's apprehensive ear as he peeked through the curtain shutting off the *cabine des mannequins*, or dressing room. It was now 10:30 A.M., show time, too late to withdraw his fragile little creations from the lynx-eyed assembly.

Out came the mannequins, following one another with split-second precision—some tense and disdainful, some bored-looking, some serenely beautiful, some picked not so much for looks as for a kind of "average" appearance, calculated to make a whole range of sizes feel that they, too, might look well in the dresses. There was applause and M. Dior smiled weakly. There was laughter and he frowned, and shook an admonitory finger at an *habilleuse* (model dresser) for not working fast enough. The press ladies fanned themselves with their programs and checked off creations they meant to write about. M. Dior mopped his brow with a leftover swatch of purest silk. One, two, three hours went by in what seemed like 15 minutes to M. Dior. Then it was over. Silence.

Tentatively, fear mingling with the usual surprise in his expression, M. Dior peeked out through the curtains. The press ladies were charging him,



After awaking at his Paris apartment, Dior stays in bed for an hour, breakfasting and reading papers

arms outflung, faces working with emotion. They grabbed him. There was an enormous confusion. Cheeks were rubbed against M. Dior's quivering jowls. Adjectives of praise and joy were expended without regard for extravagance. By acclamation, this newest showing was the greatest success in all of M. Dior's long, long string of successes. Then, the wire service reporters rushed out to inform the world.

"Christian Dior," said the United Press, "switched from the 'H' to the 'A' line today. His new silhouette wipes out curves . . . It has narrow shoulders, straight torsos, big hips . . . It completely bypasses the bosom . . ."

Then came fiendish news.

"The bosomless 'A' line is only for daytime wear . . . But for night, Dior's lavish, wide-plunging V-neckline gowns barely contain bosoms pushed almost to shoulder height . . ."

As he read this message next morning, O. B. Fenton—a man who never got out nights among the plunging necklines but only in the big-hipped and bosomless daytime—pushed his breakfast aside, rose and walked silently from his house. There was no trace of his usual rage. This thing was too big for rage. It was class discrimination. At the garage that afternoon, Mr. Fenton decided to forget the whole thing, as beneath him. That was probably just as well. For sitting in a bathtub in Paris, getting wrinkled up worse than a prune, M. Dior was at that moment turning out new designs so cunning, so diabolical, that they rather worried even himself.

Collier's