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The Black Wave

A NEW caprice in fashion is showing itself in New York. Wherever one goes one sees women dressed in black. This is not the small, regular proportion of women in mourning. On the contrary, it is composed of maids and matrons who look unusually cheerful and complacent: they are the first to get into step with fashion, their styles are dashing new, and they have been told that no shade is so becoming—has such “distinguishment,” as an advertisement happily words it. Besides, owing to that progress in which all good moderns believe, the air in New York has become progressively dirtier, and a non-committal color is, as they say, “most practical.” So, for street wear especially, we have throngs of females black from head to foot.

A number of the less adventurous, it may be said, have kept on a last year's or last season's colored hat. A number of the more adventurous have combined their black with white trimmings, so that they have the touch of piquancy which is considered so fascinating in a reviving widow. But all agree on the main note, the note of complete reserve, and abstinence, and decorum. After the wave of rust-color and the wave of green there comes this dignified abrogation.

The youngster and the elderly woman seem to rejoice in it equally. It gives a note of elegance to the pocket-size shop-girl. It gives a notion of slimness to the lady in quarto-size. On Fourteenth Street one meets it in a cheap improvisation. One sees it on Park Avenue, stepping in conscious precision of fashion into, or out of, a motor. It comes in polite demureness into a hotel restaurant. It goes in modest righteousness to the shopping district, or to tea. As it passes it murmurs, “You, unfortunately, are dressed in colors. Charming, but a little *demodée*! I am Black, misleading if you like, but inestimably correct. You gaze at me?

Must you be so curious? But, if you must, I sustain your curiosity not without pleasure. As it happens, I am impeccable. Your only salvation is to study me and, I am afraid, to copy me. *C'est tout.*”

From the point of view of social curiosity, however, it isn't quite all. Since black so strongly marks this heterogeneous crowd of young and old, pretty and not pretty, slim and fat, tall and short, rich and poor, intelligent and dull, the definite enslavement of womankind, or human kind, to fashion becomes too obtrusive not to exact some attention. It is not simply a situation created by unimaginative man. It is not the ordinary story of woman's victimization, her subjection in a man-made world. She, after all, accepts of herself this silent “decree of fashion” and rushes to embrace it. And even if she resists it, she does so as against her own compulsive sex. It is woman-made, this particular enslavement. And feminists are just as prominent in the army of the enslaved as the most submissive and intimidated of women. Lady Astor returning to her toque because her chip hat didn't “go” in the House of Commons is not, as she usually is, a sample of the reactionary type of femininity. She is a sample of the American's general attitude on the subject of clothes.

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That attitude has struck most visiting foreigners. When G. W. Steevens, Northcliffe's great "find" as a reporter, came here in 1896, he observed our servility. "No nation in the world is in such bondage to fashion as democratic America. Her men and women, young and old, wear boots that narrow to a sharp point, like skates, two inches beyond the toes; they tinker at their faces with complexion-washes and nose-machines as zealously as some people in England tinker at their souls." It was not, as a narrow critic might have it, part of the "childish, frivolous and short-sighted" character which Schopenhauer broadly ascribed to women. It was something that involves men as well as women, a subjection to the manufacturers who understand and exploit both sexes.

Part of the subjection, undoubtedly, is due to the prudence of our producers. Fashion to be profitable must be established by a concert of manufacturers, each of whom is anxious to select a model, a color or a finish which is considered to be in style. If one manufacturer plans to make white shoes with black or brown leather trimmings, the other manufacturers must come into the same field with similar designs. The consumer may reject all of these novelties and oddities, but if he in turn is an imitator and copyist he feels like an outsider if he isn't in fashion. He accepts the change just because it attracts attention and is "new." And since manufacturers can count on such herd-instinct, the consumer who has definite ideas as to his own needs is discountenanced. And America has relatively few craftsmen in a small way of business who can give him exactly what he wants, except at great expense.

Without such craftsmen we cannot have widely individual variations in style, and this the manufacturers know. But the slavishness of the American consumer makes even the manufacturers laugh. It has now reached the stage where each change is made so violent, so extreme, that one fashion successfully sets itself apart from another, and each season compels the previous season to "date." A markedly light color, we may be sure, will be introduced as soon as black has been sold to everyone, and then we shall have the scramble of the blacks to come out in the first burst of heliotrope or mauve.

The game depends on that well-established psychological trait, the inferiority-complex; and until men and women accept themselves and their own preferences their sense of inferiority can be capably exploited by the ingenious dealers in mode and vogue. Such enslavement, however, is only possible among people who change whenever things outside themselves change. It is not possible among people who are personally autonomous. The number of such people in the United States is still small, as the rapid advancement of any wave of fashion partly testifies. But autonomous men and women are the only really civilized men and women. One sign of their strength, if only a sign, is the fact that they go their way without obedience to the ebb and flow of tribal waves. They are not so conservative as the man who, when a new book comes out, reads an old one. But they have their own ideas of suitability. They ask something more than that the new should be new.