

The Female Form Divine

THE New York *Times* for October 31, 1929, carried a picture so extraordinary that even a sober-minded journal like *The Nation*, which does not as a rule concern itself with any but the Higher Things, cannot refrain from comment. It was a picture of a lady—unmistakably a lady—and one in evening dress; from her shoulders dangled what used to be called a bertha; her arms were therefore covered to the elbows; and her legs—we mention perhaps for the last time what will shortly become unmentionable—were not visible at all. If she was a bifurcated radish nobody but herself and her dressmaker were aware of it. About at her middle there were certain tucks and gathers in her costume that constricted her form into one that the female torso cannot assume without artificial aid—in other words, she evidently wore corsets. Hastily reassuring ourselves as to the date—it was not in reality a cut from *Harper's Magazine* for 1892—we rubbed our eyes, took a long breath, and laid the paper down. "Female fashions must be changing," we murmured. And so it was.

Much white paper has been utilized of late years for remarks, mostly ululatory, on the emancipation of women. Women were free, we learned; they were no longer slaves. They could vote, swear, smoke, and stay out nights. They had legs; on the last point there could be no possible shadow of doubt whatever. We learned that the entire weight of a modern flapper's garments, including her shoes, totaled about 22 ounces, and we saw in the Sunday rotogravure sections the flapper pictured in stages of undress which made the statement perfectly credible. In the midst of all the cries of joy there were certain faint moanings of distress. If it took only three yards of material to make a dress, what was to become of the silk industry? If corsets were never, never going to be worn any more, what was to be the future of the American whale? But the lady customers and the silk-worms and the whales only laughed, and woman's emancipation went on.

Now it becomes evident that the moans of distress were not in vain. And the new fashions bring back, to the triumph of the couturiers, bows, ruffles, tight waists with their accompanying corsets, "princess" slips, and—alas, for emancipation—skirts that sweep the very sidewalks, freed for so

The Female Form Divine

many happy years from this sort of broom. We do not lack voices raised in passionate protest: Fannie Hurst says, "Let's not wear them"; lady writers of somewhat lesser eminence but no less fervor declare that they can't bear them; but the department stores report that their customers, while they grumble, cannot but comply. And one sees, at theaters where the smart folks gather and at the movie palaces where the proletariat succeeds in forgetting, for a time, a harsh world, skirts that, if not actually to the ground, are much, much longer than the knee-length scarves of only yestermoth.

There is in this genuine cause for mourning. It is too bad that modern women should again be slaves to fashion; it is a pity that the female form, happily free of entanglements for half a dozen years, is in a fair way to go back to them. We ourselves should welcome a strike among the customers. We cannot hope to see our women assume the tactics of the Doukhobors, the famous Russian sect of non-resistants who will have none of the laws of Canada in which they now reside and declare their protests by the simple and charming expedient of removing their clothes, though surely in the past few years we have become accustomed enough to large sections of the female anatomy not to be too shocked by the rest of it. Let the women protest; we should applaud and admire them for it. Let them refuse to be first bound by a yard of rubber and then hung like a clothes horse with yards more of silk or wool. They looked much nicer, on the whole, in last year's clothes than the newest fashion plates give any evidence of their looking in those of the present. Indeed at no other time do we recall that the most up-to-the-minute styles gave such an impression of general dowdiness and disrepair.

But long association with human nature does not make us too optimistic. We shall hope; we shall, if necessary, pray. A sweeping glance at the other half of the human race, the male, is not encouraging. Women are slaves to fashion. True. What of men? Do they still wear wool suits in hot weather, high collars in all weathers, stiff hats on their heads, stiffer shoes on their feet, and the most curious and hideous cut of coat and waistcoat so far devised by an ingenious tailor? The answer is that they do. If the women are wiser, more power to them. If they refuse to conform to the current styles in dress they will deserve to govern a meek and docile world.