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THE REVOLUTION IN DRESS

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SOME time ago in these pages I expressed the opinion that, so far from it being likely that the future would see all women wearing trousers, it was much more probable that it would see all men wearing skirts. A paradoxical opinion, I admit—one which drew rebukes upon me, and one which requires certain qualifications. But I desired to call attention to one of the two most important items on the social side of modern development.

It may be that we are moving in the direction of Communism, Cæsarism (or, as the latest fashion will have it, Fascism), or perhaps towards the new Dark Ages. It is certain that the whole world has begun playing games invented or perfected in England, and that throughout the entire civilized world woman has effected a change in her dress to a degree not to be paralleled in history. These two drifts touch at certain points, but it is with the second of them that I wish chiefly to deal at this moment. I doubt whether any social historian has yet realized the magnitude of the change which began in 1910, or thereabouts, when petticoats began to disappear, and which was obviously accelerated in 1915, when the first short skirts were worn. In previous ages women have denuded themselves here and there with a view to allurements, and superficial observers to-day sometimes remark that the modern tendency is a sign of decadence. But the discarding of unnecessary garments, which has been the main feature of the progress of women's fashions for some fifteen years, has not been governed mainly by the consideration of sexual appeal, however much this element may enter into it. It is the expression of a revolutionary change in the position of women in the world and in their own view of their position.

Let us take the short period of fifteen years. There are men to-day old enough to be married and the fathers of families who would be astonished to see a woman in the fashions of 1910. As a boy, I saw photographs of female relatives in bonnets and bustles, and odd they seemed to me, but not so odd as now seem to me recollections of my own contemporaries in skirts that

swept the ground, and collars, supported by framework of who knows what material, that touched the ears. Fifteen years ago, as I have recently confirmed by examining the files of a newspaper, chorus-girls in a musical comedy muffled up their bodies, at any rate while at rest, much more jealously than any typist whom one can see in the public streets to-day.

And this muffling was a matter of ridicule. Tight-laced corsets, high collars, innumerable layers of petticoats, and what not else, may have (problematically) made the female form a thing of attractive mystery, but they made the average female herself very inapt for the action, which she was beginning to claim the right to, of leaping on moving omnibuses. In those dark ages before the war, women's fashions changed from year to year, but, generally speaking, at the dressmaker's word of command. Then, one day, driven mad by God, the dressmaker abdicated, without knowing what he was doing. The first short skirt sounded the knell of his dictatorship; and since then womanhood has never looked back. The old gowns, long and rich, heavily decorated, employing incredibly numerous yards of material, not to be fabricated save by experts, disappeared at a stroke, and no effort so far has availed to bring them back. Woman felt the freedom of her limbs, and since that time she has gone on unrelentingly to a degree of comfort in dress which makes man's old reproaches against her look rather silly. Nor, though men find the new fashions attractive, are the new fashions designed for the attraction of men. Poppæa clothed herself in transparent silks, but she was not the woman for a brisk tramp in the country, let alone for a hard struggle in a tennis tournament. The costume now called Directoire had other ends in view than freedom of movement. But to-day the normal young woman has discovered how to dress in a manner at once hygienic and convenient and attractive. She can, as a result, run like a man and she suffers no longer from anæmia.

I say again that this is a phenomenon which the social historian appears to be passing over. We do not realize that a tradition of centuries has within a decade been stood on its head. Six years ago two adventurous young married women of my acquaintance, ever so little in advance of their time, were mobbed in the streets of a small country town when they appeared there in breeches and long coats. To-day they could go there in shorts with bare knees and hardly a soul would notice their passage. It is not many years since hockey-skirts reaching below the knees, with voluminous and ugly bloomers as a second line of defence, were regarded as a little risky, though instances when they ungovernably aroused the

passions of the opposite sex were not easily discovered. To-day, you may find yourself, as I did recently, talking between events to the woman world's champion of something or other in athletics, clad like a boy in singlet, shorts, socks and shoes, without the smallest trace of embarrassment on either side. I gave no more than a passing philosophic thought (here embodied) to her pretty bare legs, and she, I will swear, no thought at all.

The truth is that woman has spent the last ten years modifying her clothing without any view to sexual allurements, but without losing sight of that specially feminine character which women's clothes have always had. She has, however unconsciously, gone on the principle of admitting light and air to her skin as much as possible. She has, incidentally, evolved a dress that much conveniences the movement of her limbs. Still more incidentally, she has evolved a form of dress that is attractive.

At one time, women's clothes, considering the normal activities of the human being, were a legitimate laughing-stock. The first really fundamental result of that crucial enactment, the Married Women's Property Act of 1882, is not that women have the vote and can enter the professions if they want to, but that, proceeding from this ideal of independence, they have gone several strides in front of men in comfortable and hygienic clothing. The clothing of the average man weighs some pounds more than that of the average woman; and, if women can manage with no more protection against the changes of the weather, then men are left to plead an especial delicacy of constitution—which is absurd. I really think we should do well if we subdued ourselves to learn from the weaker sex. There are, after all, months when men who work in offices take off their coats and roll up their shirt sleeves and complain of the heat, while their typists continue to function in cool and contemptuous serenity. The first men who dare to put on shorts and sleeveless shirts will deserve a testimonial from their sex.