

A FRIENDLY LETTER TO GIRL FRIENDS

*VII—By Mrs. A. D. T. Whitney



EAR GIRL FRIENDS: Now, if you please, a word about clothes. Did clothes originate only and wholly with the knowledge of evil? Are they the badge and the bother, simply, of a depraved humanity? Or is the instinct of clothing and adorning the body something that once had the primal innocence in it that possibly came into Eve's head in some fashion long before her

intimacy with the serpent? There she was among the flowers, the bright-winged insects, the soft-plumed birds of Paradise. Do you suppose she never twisted blossoms in her hair, or wreathed a vine around her shoulders, or wove crown, or bracelet, or necklace of beautiful dropped feathers or many-tinted leaves? Evidently, when she came to making coverings in earnest, she had the facility of her fingers ready. Ah, it was only that the innocence was gone—the happy thought changed to a sense of shame. Clothing was not so much because of degradation, as that it became itself degraded when sin came. The knowledge of good would not have hindered—it would only have made more exquisitely graceful and expressive—human attire, which would inevitably have been desired and needed. The knowledge of evil marred everything; put a vain, unworthy, sensuous consciousness in the place of a selfless delight in loveliness and use. And saying that, we say precisely what demands saying as to the evil frivolities of the world we live in to-day. *Be clothed; but be in your right mind.* Doth not God clothe the lilies?

THE consideration of dress—of outer presentment—comes at once with social living. It is almost the first question. How shall we *appear—apparel* ourselves—to make our personality true, fit, pleasing? It is a right question. It concerns a duty. Each individual is responsible for just his or her own share and representation of the beauty, dignity and possible perfection of the human form and presence. If clothing does not set forth these it is either mere indifferent covering, an answering of necessity, and so serving only its most literal end, or it is a corruption, a setting forth of something unworthy, an expression of something which, if we trace it to its hidden, perhaps remote, origin, we might be very sorry to define. I think fashion in dress can be brought to no truer test than whether it indicates and emphasizes the best, the sweetest, the most really gracious, delicate, *self-forgetful* quality of the wearer. I think I like the word "clothes" better than "dress," for this very reason. To be "clothed upon" from the inner; or merely to decorate, or affect, upon the outside—that is the distinction between the good and the bad of it. To "dress" is to arrange, to deck, to trim, to treat externally, as a skin, a fabric. To "clothe" is to enfold fitly, to invest with a garment, to *habit* the person, which plainly signifies the inhabiting, the in-having, of the personality. I cannot bear to see a woman look as if she *felt her clothes*; as if her sense of vital being were in them, as bodily sensation is in the nerves of the skin.

CLOTHING and dress are as speech and language. The one is expression—that which is evolved from within; the other is of the tongue; the two words, "speech" and "language," are formed from the two meanings. Clothing should speak something; it should have the three qualities of speech—simplicity, sincerity, fitness to person and occasion. Singleness, directness are of grace and truth; complexity is confusion, and more or less of falsehood. Apply the principles to garment and garniture. There should be a reason why for everything; at least, a possible reason why, or a significance. Superfluous tags and tails have no reason; an intricacy is not a beauty, except so far as it is kept delicately traceable. Folds should hang from a natural holding; uselessly caught here and there they are only mussy. A thing, no matter how fine or splendid, stuck on without purpose or connection, is no adornment. See how it is in the making of a picture. A tree, a vine, grasses, blossoms, need to be kept to their relations—to be accounted for—in their details. You cannot scratch in stems like jackstraws; they must follow the lines of real growth. Flowers may not be massed heedlessly, as piled-up decapitations. We want to see them spring from a group, with sweetly-nodding or stately-lifting heads, just as their stems, more or less flexible, bear them naturally outward or upward. We want this truth of life in a painting; this grace of realism in, however few, literal, practicable details. I know very well that recent art gets over its difficulty by what is called impressionism. Impressionism is all well enough if it can convey itself; but a blur, a smooch, is not an impression; a fog is not a landscape; a snarl and tumble of broken slants is not a growing grassfield. It is not, as they pretend, even what we see. We do account for the individual stems, the separate pensile heads. Nature gives lines enough for a clear thought to carry out. There would be even a greater rush upon our opticians than there already is, if our vision served us no more distinctly than the modern canvas.

THE same rule should hold with what we put on. Nothing should contradict, or confuse, or overdo, as to its own particulars, or the lines, curves, movements of the human form which it relates to and illustrates. Nothing abnormal, arbitrary, fantastic in design or suggestion should be tolerated. We must go yet further back, must adapt yet more thoroughly. Nothing should give an air, a seeming, of what a woman would not be. She must remember that whatever garb she assumes she makes a picture of herself. And it is a true picture.

What, then, are we to do about fashion? There will be fashions as long as the world lasts. Variations and

inventions will come in and assert themselves, and it is good that they should. They are oftentimes for comfort, for becomingness—which is the suggestion of the ideal of that which we would become; for improved and longer use. When they show these justifications we may well hail and adopt them, but when they are caprices and dictations, obvious tricks of the trade to sell new goods or larger quantities, or force custom for the dressmakers, I am ashamed of women (daughters of the Revolution) who will tamely fall in with them, and pay their tax in time and nerve.

THE first idea of a new fashion is apt to be a thought of beauty, its initial form to have a touch of grace. Pushed to an extreme it becomes a craze, takes shape as a monstrosity. Witness a case in present point—the rapid development of the insanity of the sleeve. The first little easy shoulder puff was so pretty; was such relief from the pinion of the old strait-jacket casing. Even when it elevated and spread a little more it was but the opening out, as a flower opens, to full expression. Or rather, it became the charming sign of the setting of a flower among its leaves. That was the way a pretty head and face looked, lifting up between the soft enfoldings. And a plain one was graciously sheltered, its redeeming modesty gently suggested. There the thing ought to have stopped. But it went on and on, dry goods people and costumers encouraging and goading, until it became—I don't care who adopts it—I have, unhappily, two pairs myself that did not get snubbed soon enough in the shapening—a vulgarity. Would you ever think of putting a tea rose in a vase with a cabbage leaf each side of it? Or do you wish to look like that? The wise woman will stop the fashion in the middle. Then she is safe from either end—the old desuetude, or the sure-coming reaction. The wise woman will not begin with a fashion unless she feels that it is an improvement, a real artistic or comfortable gain. There are plenty of poor fashions that drop to the ground, or that ought to; and who cares to be caught with the stamp of one upon her that never had reason for being, or could make out to be? "Following the fashion"—at a safe distance—is the very thing to do; the attempt to lead or announce it by rushing ahead of it is what no lady will ever be guilty of. She would as soon take her place in a drawing-room by hustling forward and outracing others.

I THINK the trouble with the fashions of the present day is that they have given up their intentions. They mean nothing but "style," and that means the last dictum; they are arbitrary; disconnected from any special adaptations; proceeding from no natural inherence, by no natural steps—and so not *style* at all, in the true meaning. They are alike, practically, for all sorts and conditions of women. They rule in kitchen and drawing-room, in nursery, dancing-school, and in the old lady's sitting-room, in places of summer resort, and at winter dinner-tables, at the fashionable luncheon and at church. This really isn't the kind of thing that used to be. I can remember when the child's dress, the young girl's dress, the grown woman's, the matron's, the elderly dame's, differed; were successively reached and worn, acknowledged and submitted to. I can remember when I was a little girl looking at my grandmother, and thinking how sweet it was to be an old lady, in simple white cap tied under the chin, and folded lace about the throat, the two meeting in reverent veiling of the changed, yet still in their way lovely, contours—wrinkled indeed, but into a gentle repose; not strained and eager, growing into haggishness through struggle against the confession of years. The old womanhood of true womanliness is never haggish. It is the false woman who won't grow old peaceably, who turns into a scarecrow. I remember how especially sweet it was when two old ladies sat visiting together, with some slight individual varying of cap and kerchief, as their spectacles varied to suit the individual eyes. Life was behind them; life—in all its memories and realizations—was with them; life—of the eternal years—was before them. They waited—rested—communed in a wonderful quietness and sympathy. I did not so account for it then; but the sense of it was underneath my pleased and tender perception.

I AM sorry for you girls who know nothing about the charming little "cottage bonnet" that girls in the second quarter of our century wore. To show the profile beyond the bonnet was barefacedness, in the obnoxious as well as literal sense. The simple shape sloped slightly from the crown, which was defined, though low, and rounded outward just enough to frame the face. A single flower, or tiny cluster, or a fine mob-wreath, might be tucked in modestly against the hair; a pretty frill was plaited about the neck, beneath which showed the dainty white collar or ruffle; the bonnet was crossed between crown and brim with some rich, soft ribbon that tied it under the chin. The rest of the dress was in keeping: a gathered bodice, a full, straight skirt that fluttered back in the little breezes of motion, and then subsided to its lines again from waist to instep; a round cape, or some simple mantle, about the shoulders; this was the array they walked abroad in. And they were not always walking abroad. Their mothers called that "spinning street yarn," which no well-brought-up maiden would do.

There is a reflex action in clothes. We grow to that which we put on. We learn to strike the keynote of our habiliments—to tone ourselves inwardly to outward expression. Instance, the Quakeresses, the Sisters of Charity, and in contrast, the flashy women of "style." A terrible thing happens to a woman who adapts herself to pronounced effects, to conspicuous forms and decorations. By-and-by she cannot get into anything else. She cannot return to her primitive sweet bounds. The *génie* is out of the bottle. Her identity is gone if she tries simplicity again. And the time comes when nothing is becoming to her, because fashion and show are caricatures, and not to be distinguished is to be extinguished. Gown and bonnet have become character; character is all gown and bonnet. It is a retribution; and the worst of it is, the condemned does not know that she is under punishment. She only thinks, "Those other things do not suit me. I need more evidence—more emphasis."

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(CONTINUATION FROM PAGE 4)

LOOKING back through long years in which I can trace these things, it seems to me that the second French Empire—brief, unsubstantial, meretricious—inaugurated the movement in false shows, ambitions, luxuries, which became such a rush into lower levels of life in our Republic. The beautiful woman whose genius disported itself in lovely inventions of dress, and those who surrounded her and followed her lead in her court, excited, throughout the world of women looking on, an eager impulse of desire. Newspapers teemed with gorgeous, fascinating descriptions; those who could achieve only ordinary constructions and effects felt themselves tame, flat, obliterated; in our own country a tremendous surge of extravagance set in. This was accompanied, followed and abetted by our own great crises and changes, bringing influxes of sudden wealth, gold discovery, petroleum discovery, war, war prices and shoddy; expansions and monopolies. An almost instantaneous wave of recklessness, a blaze of splendor in dress, equipment, social elegancies, swept over our land, submerging and blinding. It controlled quickly the great centres, and reached toward the remotest little quietudes. After that there were no quietudes.

Sewing machines began to buzz; but the sewing, instead of being done, was aggravated into hopeless increase. There was no end to the "frills" that were "put on." Hoop skirts and trains and drapery-sleeves invaded the kitchens. Home service was demoralized; fancy demands in wages despoiled simple economical housekeepers of their assistants; "girls" must robe themselves like "ladies"; a dreadful degeneracy was begun, under the illusion of artistic progress and high refinement, and it could not be stopped at any line of social grade. In this country all are empresses. The few real nobles who resisted, who stood back in native dignity and let the tide roll by, were glanced over with superior surprise by the newly grand. A little incident in an eclectic establishment in Boston illustrated over the counter the prevailing state of things and became a current anecdote. Two quiet West End ladies sat in the silk department carefully choosing some soberly elegant stuff, and purchasing in moderate quantity. To them rustled in a magnificent dame. She tossed the fabrics shown her negligently about, rejected superciliously the modest in style and cost, gathered swiftly around her a heap of the most expensively splendid, and nonchalantly ordered abundant measures of this, that and the other sent to an address for which she furnished her card; and then swept forth again, all in about five minutes. As she went the first two ladies looked at each other with a calm amazement. "Shoddy," whispered one. "No, madame," came back in clear, incisive tone over a satin shoulder, "*petroleum!*" It was cleverly retorted; but the demonstration was none the less of the under order.

IT is of no use to try to enter here upon what the men have done; upon clubs and coaches, and yachts and races; upon women, certainly, rests their own fearful share of responsibility for the unrighteous greed, the unworthy ambitions, the senseless motive of our later life, and when all crumbles back in the ruin of such things to the compulsion of new beginnings, it will depend greatly—most of all—upon what women will do with new conditions; upon how Eve, when the flaming sword shall have driven her forth from her false paradise, will behave in the wilderness.

The true enfranchisement of women must be from their own slaveries. With a beautiful fitness of atonement there comes just now from the very centre and source of the tyrannies of fashion, a note of freedom. In the French Republic starts a movement toward sanity, soberness, peace. "Noble Dames in Council" there (I quote the heading of an article on the matter in a Boston newspaper) have met to consider what the very *haute noblesse* may do to escape the oppression of "whims," "freaks," "atrocities," that take the power of decrees; that "make caricatures of the most beautiful," fools and victims of the imitative masses; how they can best rebel against "incessant changes" that waste material, time and life. And they advise three things: first, refusal to adopt "every novelty of costume solely because it is a novelty"; second, independent consideration of individual fitness in any style, and an insistence upon the right of every woman to "remain distinctly herself"; and third, a protest in action, by daring to continue to "wear garments, once well and fittingly made, until they begin to wear out."

Jerusalem, thine iniquity is pardoned! Beautiful upon the high places are the feet of them that bring good tidings.

"Distinctly herself." It is the clear announcement of the whole essentialness and intent of garb. It is to set forth the individual. A lily is to be a lily; a rose, a rose; a clover blossom, a clover blossom.

A palm, a goldenrod, an ear of wheat—each has its use, place, aspect. A law of the Lord makes raiment. Life is a garment. We shall have and wear from need to need, from growth to growth, that which life shapes in us and fits us to. And no passing artifice of caparison can disguise it.

"I will clothe thee with change of raiment."

If God clothe the grass of the field shall He not much more clothe you?

William D. Whiting

THE GIFT OF GRACIOUSNESS

By Mrs. Willie Walker Caldwell

IF I could play fairy godmother to all the girls I know I should bring to each christening the same gift—thereby endowing them with a wonderful power, which would bring them friends, happiness, influence, and love—the gift of graciousness.

Most girls fail to appreciate this quality, which is more winning than accomplishments, and more enduring than beauty. When the freshness, light-heartedness, and graces of youth are gone this gift abides, and forms as becoming a diadem to the matron's brow, or the grandmother's silvered locks, as to the beauty of the maiden.

Unlike beauty, which God has not granted to all women, and accomplishments, for which all have not a like taste or fitness, this gift can be acquired by all. The only things that can prevent its acquisition are a selfish disposition and a loveless heart—it will not dwell where love for humanity does not abide, and, like true politeness, it is founded on unselfishness.

I HAVE heard girls say something like this: "Oh, she is nice to every one—it is natural for her to be so—somehow I do not feel that way. I am constitutionally indifferent, and it would be hypocrisy in me to pretend to be interested in most people, when really there are only a few I care about." I have heard these same girls complain of not being so universally liked as other girls, or of being left out of some pleasure in which their more gracious friends were included. The secret at the bottom of the natural indifference of these girls is generally selfishness, indisposition to put themselves out for others, or else a conceited idea that their charms are so great that every one should pay court to them and expect nothing in return.

I have heard other girls say that they were too timid to be gracious, that their shyness made them appear indifferent. The best antidote for timidity is to cultivate an unselfish interest in others, and to think as little as possible of one's self; there is no more effectual cloak for shyness than a kindly graciousness of manner.

I KNOW two girls who live in the same town. One of them is considered very beautiful, graceful and bright; she has several admirers and a few friends, but the majority of her associates and her mother's and father's friends feel entirely indifferent to her, while some comment unfavorably upon her repellent manners. The other girl is not near so pretty, and not a whit brighter, but she has sweet, gracious ways with old people and children, with her mother's friends and her own, with the tradespeople and servants, and every one in the town is her admirer, champion and friend. Wherever she goes, smiles and blessings attend her.

Have you not observed the blessed presence of a gracious girl like this at a social gathering or house party? She smiles brightly at her hostess, and enters heartily into the pleasures provided for her; stops in the corner for a brief chat with the dear old grandmother, and watches for an opportunity to exchange an unaffected greeting with her host. She compliments the pretty costume or sweet voice of a shrinking girl, and makes the awkward boys, who are just entering society, feel comfortable by her unstudied ease and cordiality. She quietly thanks the servants for their services, is ready for a romp with the baby brother, or a game of dolls with the little sisters, and makes herself a veritable source of sunshine to a whole gathering or to an entire household.

AS life ripens and duties multiply, this "gift of graciousness" finds new channels, and that which may have at first been little more than a trick of manner, prompted by kindness of heart, develops into a trait of character—a life principle—and so becomes a power.

What a subtle, yet strong, force in the management of a home! How it blesses the husband, assists in controlling the servants, and influencing the children; what a potent charm it is in social life, and especially in performing the agreeable duties of hostess. The girl whose mother has this gift is particularly fortunate. Her home is sure to be a happy one, her friends are the friends of her mother also, and in the pleasures of her youth she has her mother's help and sympathy side by side with her due restraint and judicious advice.