

## HOW I DRESSED MY DAUGHTERS.



"How nicely the days are lengthening!" said I the other afternoon to Mrs. Astell, an old school-friend, who had lately come with her family to reside in our neighbourhood, and from whose society and that of her daughters my girls and I anticipated deriving much pleasure.

"Yes, indeed," said Mrs. Astell, "but I

cannot say that I am glad of it. It seems to me as if we were no sooner settled with winter dresses, than spring came on, and everything had to be changed, and all the work begun over again. I envy you your boys; girls are such a trouble to dress."

"But you forget I have three daughters."

"Of course you have; I had quite forgotten. Well, don't you find that it is a great anxiety at the beginning of the season to get them all fitted out with clothes?"

"No, I cannot say that I do. We all set to work together, and soon get it over. It was very fatiguing when they were too young to help me, and I had to do it all myself; but now Marian, my eldest girl, is a great assistance."

"But you do not mean to say that you make the dresses at home?"

"I could not afford to put them all out," I answered. "We are not rich, and that would most seriously increase our yearly expenditure."

"Of course it would, I understand that perfectly," said Mrs. Astell. "With the present fashions, the making of a dress costs almost as much as the material."

"We find that the saving effected is quite as great in the quantity of material required as in the mere cost of making, though that is considerable," said I. "I believe, in cutting out dresses for the four of us, we use fully eight yards less of material than would be considered necessary if a dressmaker had to dictate the quantity to us. When I say this, I do not at all mean to insinuate that dressmakers are dishonest; but, of course, it is not their interest, as it is ours, to plan, and measure, and save little corners here and there, and this it is that makes all the difference."

"And may I ask how old your girls are?" said my friend.

"Marian is sixteen, Alice is fourteen, and Jennie—the youngest—is twelve."

"Would you mind telling me how much their dress costs? Indeed, I do not ask you out of idle curiosity."

"I will tell you with pleasure," I answered. "Taking one with the other, it costs thirty pounds a year."

"Ten pounds each! It is almost incredible. And they look so nice. My daughters' dress costs at least double. You must devote a very great deal of thought to it."

"No, indeed. I believe my daughters think as little of dress as most people. I have a wholesome dread of fostering in them too great a love of dress, though on the other hand I am very far from wishing them to disregard it, and look upon it as a matter of no importance. I consider it is a duty we owe to society, and to husbands and fathers, that our appearance and that of our children should be bright and pleasing."

"Well," said Mrs. Astell, "as far as my experience of gentlemen goes, they do nothing but grumble if their wives and daughters wish to dress well."

"Excuse me, don't you think they grumble because they don't like to have to pay so heavily for it? I fancy that most men would prefer that the ladies of their family should be elegant and tasteful rather than dowdy and old-fashioned in their appearance, if they had not found by experience that their preference would be gratified only at the expense of a pretty deep plunge into their unfortunate pockets. In many cases, however, I believe the grumbling arises out of sheer disgust. No sensible man likes to discover that the minds of his womenfolk are entirely engrossed with thoughts of dress. As for us, I think I may say that the extent to which it occupies our thoughts is this. At the close of each season, as the time approaches for changing the dresses, we all devote ourselves energetically to the work for about a fortnight. When it is accomplished we leave it."

"But to be one's own dressmaker must involve a great deal of trouble."

"Of course it is a trouble. Most things that are worth having cost trouble, and very often something more. You have to make up your mind whether the advantage gained is worth what you give for it. Of course every one must decide that for themselves. We find that it is."

"And how do you manage to fit the dresses? and where do you get the fashions?"

"The fashions we get from various sources. Whenever we see anything that strikes us as being very pretty, we notice how it is made, or friends give us ideas, or we look in the shop windows, and it is really very easy to gain a general notion of what is being worn. Then, if we care to do it, we can buy a couple of fashion-books every year, one at the end of summer and one at the end of winter; and there are places in every town where patterns cut out in tissue-paper can

be bought for a trifling cost. I should tell you, however, that though we endeavour to avoid having our things out of date, we do not attempt to have them in the *height* of fashion, but rather tasteful and neat."

"And why do you avoid the height of fashion?" said Mrs. Astell.

"For one thing, because dresses are more easily both made and altered when they have not so many frills, furbelows, and kiltings; for another, because I think young girls never look so well as when they are simply dressed. Then as to the fit, after people are accustomed to it, there is no difficulty about that. If I were a new beginner at this sort of thing, I should rip up an old dress that fitted nicely, and cut the new material out by it. If, after being used, the pattern were cut out in brown paper, with a written word or two on each piece to say what it was for, and whether or not the turnings-in were allowed, it would last for a long time with slight alterations. I need scarcely say that we always tack the dresses loosely together at first, and fit them on before making them properly."

"Well, I think I shall try if I cannot do as you do," said Mrs. Astell. "The advantages are so great that it is worth while making the effort."

Mrs. Astell did try, and though she found it rather difficult at first, and she and her daughters failed with one or two dresses, yet as she had made the experiment with materials of trifling value, no great loss was sustained. Hilda Astell, the eldest of the sisters, was soon discovered to possess a decided talent for fitting dresses, and as my Marian was particularly clever in trimming hats and bonnets, they used each to avail themselves of the other's services in these departments. I am quite sure that the saving they effected was considerable.

It must be evident, however, that in order to dress economically, and well, attention has to be paid to something else than dressmaking and millinery, so I had better narrate in detail the plan we adopted to accomplish this desirable end. As I have before said, we calculated the expense of our dress one with the other—that is, we were very careful to buy good material, everything was the best of its kind, and then the dresses were made up again and again, and used for the younger ones after the elder ones had done with them. I do not think much of any fabric that cannot, with proper treatment, be worn for three seasons. Many will last for four or five. We were very fond of washing materials, such as hollands, cottons, and blue tickings, for morning wear; French cambric and muslin for evening. When I say muslin, I do not mean thin muslin, but the thick white muslin with a stripe or check on it, which can be worn with a lining quite up to the throat if necessary. If my girls went to a picnic or evening party, they always wore white. The advantage of these dresses is that after washing they look fresh and new. And here I must mention one great point—*we got them up at home*. When my eldest girl was about eight years old, a friend of my mother's came in to see us, and in talking to the child, asked her if she could wash and iron.

I laughed, and said—

"It is rather too early to begin that yet."

"Not at all, my dear," she replied. "If you will take my advice, you will buy the little girl a small box-iron and two heaters, and let her on regular days wash, starch, and iron her own doll's-clothes. If you do that, and, disregarding the trouble, take a little pains to show her how to do them properly, you will find that in a short time she can do small things for you; and when she is a big girl, will be able to do her own dresses."

I followed this advice with all the girls, and the result is that Marian can get up her own dresses very nicely indeed, and assists me with her sisters'. We should find washing dresses very expensive if this were not done. I hear constantly of laundresses charging half-a-crown for muslin and piqué dresses, and more than that, of tearing and scorching them, so that they have to be laid aside long before the proper amount of wear has been got out of them. I would therefore advise young ladies, with whom the expense of their dress is a consideration, to learn to iron. It is quite clean work, there is nothing dirty or disagreeable about it; and if they can do it, their dress during the summer may always be light, fresh, pretty, and very inexpensive. As to the washing, we had a good stock of summer dresses, and a woman came in once a fortnight to wash them out. We did the rest ourselves.

With these muslin dresses my girls wore natural flowers whenever they could get them, and in this way saved the money that would otherwise have had to be spent on ribbons or artificial ones. We had fortunately a piece of ground belonging to our house. Very small it was; but they took a little pains with it, put in seeds, and reared a few plants—just sufficient for the table and for their hair and dress. Perhaps it was a mother's partiality, but I never saw any girls who looked in my eyes better than mine did, with their bright faces, their simple dresses, and a rose, a scarlet geranium, or perhaps a few ivy-leaves or holly-berries in hair and bosom. Surely there is nothing in nature half so pretty as an unaffected, pretty girl, prettily dressed.

There are of course many people so circumstanced that they cannot get up their own dresses. To these I would recommend alpacas of all shades, which look well, and have an endless amount of wear in them; also bèges and shalets—good shalets, costing about two shillings and tenpence per yard. Alpacas, however, are the best. A superior black alpaca looks almost as well as a silk. By the way, it is very nice when a girl can have one pretty silk dress; but this cannot be obtained out of ten pounds a year. For winter wear we chose French merinoes and woollen reps, and were careful to buy a couple of yards of any fabric more than was required for immediate use, and with these we were able to make afterwards any alterations we wished. I always made a point of doing this, because I had again and again been obliged to throw dresses aside for want of a little extra material; which, if not purchased at the time, I had found difficulty in matching when repairs were necessary. I am very partial to subdued colours in dress. If a

girl is awkward, the awkwardness is not so conspicuous; and if she is pretty, the prettiness will not be overpowered.

Bonnets and hats of course were trimmed at home, and seldom cost more than six or eight shillings each.

We followed the same rule with underclothing that we did with dresses. We chose good calico, and took pains to make them nicely, and then there was always satisfaction in looking at and wearing them. At the same time, they were not too elaborately trimmed, on account of the ironing. I need scarcely say that we never thought of *buying* embroidery. We wore Welsh flannel; for, though it does not look quite so well as the Lancashire to begin with, it wears much better; and also Balbriggan hose. On two points I was most particular, and those were gloves and boots. However well a lady may be dressed in every other respect, if these are defective, all the rest will be spoilt. A badly-fitting glove, or an untidy, unshapely boot, would detract from the appearance of the best-dressed lady in the world. There are no two particulars in which our French neighbours excel us more than in these. With regard to them, I can only repeat what I have said about so many other things—that the best are the cheapest. Good kid gloves can be cleaned again and again—that is, if they are not worn too long. For every-day wear, the best calf-skin look very nice, and are much more serviceable than kid. If practicable, the colour should correspond with that of the bonnet. As to boots, the same principle applies. We paid a higher price per pair than many of our friends, but we found on comparing notes that ours wore three times as long as theirs, and that our yearly expenditure was not nearly so high. The great mistake which people

make about boots is in wearing them too far before they send them to be repaired. There is no article of a lady's attire of which it may more truly be said, "A stitch in time saves nine." It is good economy to buy boots six months before they are wanted, wear them once or twice to fit them to the foot, then put them away to season.

I think it will be evident that by managing our dress thus—buying everything thoroughly good, and getting the full amount of wear out of them—many articles did not need replacing for three or four years. A mantle was kept two years for best and two years for every-day wear. A waterproof was expected to last at least as long, and the hollands and alpacas the same; and thus the replenishing of the entire wardrobe was spread over a period of four or five years.

I am quite aware that by many people these ideas of mine about dress will be looked upon as rather too quiet and old-fashioned; but I can only say that if my daughters have never been remarkable for their dressiness, neither have they been so for their want of it; and they have done me no discredit when placed in comparison with companions upon whom much larger sums of money have been spent. And when I look around and see how great the tendency is at the present day to bring up girls with no other idea in life than to regard as the chief end thereof the solution of the problem: Wherewithal shall I be clothed? I am better satisfied that my daughters, whilst neat and unpretentious in attire, should have acquired habits of self-help and economy, and remain simple and natural, than that they should be in the possession of extensive wardrobes by the indulgence of extravagant tastes.

PHILLIS BROWNE.

## YOUR SECRET.



WHEN the late immortal Thackeray was being shown over a new mansion, it is reported of him (but for the fact I will not vouch any more than for the usual thousand and one light stories of literature) that he put the following query to his guide:—

"But where is the closet, my dear sir, in

which you keep the family skeleton?"

Witty enough in its way, this question, and wonderfully suggestive, for is there a house anywhere without its family skeleton? Of course, there are actual skeletons. I distinctly remember to this day, when a boy, living in a country town in Buckinghamshire, being shown, at a veritable apothecary's, a veritable skeleton,

in a veritable closet, and I know that I was in veritable alarm all the while it was being exhibited to me, lest it should step out, or spring out, or otherwise—if peradventure, as lawyers would say, it should take it into its hollow head "to annoy, injure, assault, and endanger you the aforesaid, and produce irritation, vexation, alarm, and indignation." However, there the skeleton was, sure enough—a grim spectre: the ogling not to be indulged in by me in any second spectacle, and especially to be forgotten towards evening or bed-time. You wouldn't have caught me sleeping in that doctor's house as a boy, no, not for sacks of marbles, nor piles of rabbit-hutches, nor pigeon-cots of cooing pigeons. To this day I would prefer such an actual skeleton in some other person's closet, and not in one near to my domicile.

However, the figure of speech is what I am dealing with, and we are all supposed, according to prevalent tradition, to have a skeleton in our closet.

What popular philosophy shall we adopt concerning its treatment? First of all, shall we keep open the