

## TALKS WITH WOMEN.

## LETTERS TO MY DAUGHTER.

BY JENNY JUNE.

## DRESS AT HOME AND ABROAD.



SINCE the inventive genius of our first mother found in figure leaves a basis of operations, dress has served more or less to occupy the thoughts and attention of mankind, until now, when it is probably the most fruitful subject for tongue and pen, that can be found in the domain of social and individual life.

Everybody writes, everybody talks, about dress. Women especially find in it their principal resource and occupation; nor do I see why they should be so severely blamed for it. When they have been taught better, and the world itself has learned to value the man or the woman for themselves rather than the cost and cut of their garments, the subject of clothing, in the minds of women as well as men, will occupy its proper place.

At present even the right-minded girl is perplexed by the many contradictory opinions she hears, and appalled by the severity of the condemnation passed upon those of her own sex who represent the most diverse habits and conditions. The "Girl of the Period," with her small airs and exaggerations of all the caprices of *la mode*, has been used *ad nauseam* for brainless paragraphists to sharpen their dull wits upon, while the same empty conceit would be just as ready to exercise itself upon women whose devotion to a principle had induced them to sacrifice the natural love of appearing at their best to what they considered a worthier object.

Out of a dozen people, no two will be found to express the same ideas of the duty of women in regard to dress. With some a high moral obligation is involved in always dressing "well," that is to say, fashionably. It is a woman's business to "look well," and she cannot look well, according to this code, unless her skirt, waist, train, or sleeves are shortened or lengthened in exact accordance with the prevailing mode, and are of the color and material prescribed by fashion.

Others, equally zealous, ignore, or would have women ignore,

fashion altogether. With these, fashion is an unreasoning and always unreasonable tyrant, whose dictates no woman of sense would obey.

Few women have been accustomed to think enough to form opinions of their own, or rather to think that they ought to exercise opinions of their own; so the mass of them, even the women of experience, mothers, are swayed by the impressions made, upon them by the authors which they read, the circle in which they move, and the habits engendered by their social conditions and opportunities. Some mothers, compelled to pinching economy, will yet strain every nerve to exhibit their small, spindle-legged, flat-chested darlings in white kid boots, low boddices, and distended skirts at dancing-school or party; while others, the wives of millionaires, will restrict the wardrobes of twenty-years old daughters to the most modest limits, preferring for them a Quaker-like severity to the modern indulgence in the senseless changes and extravagances of *les modes*.

The strength of fashion grows out of the common faculty of imitation—few can originate, but many can follow—and the majority accept just what they find, without an inquiry as to whether it is necessary or best for them to do so, until some one comes who discovers a better thing, and gradually persuades the world into its adoption.

It is just as well, however, to remember, that the world is as freshly born to us as we to the world; that it is composed of elements capable of improvement; that it is constantly undergoing changes and transformations, and that perfection has not yet been reached in any direction.

There is no reason, therefore, why we should accept what we find in dress, or food, or manners, or other things more or less important, unless the thing we find seems to us good.

Not that it is best always to run directly counter to received habits and opinions, or to enter a violent crusade against what we conceive to be injurious or absurd. Changes brought about by natural methods are always slow, often imperceptible until they are effected, and are the result of gradual, but persistent efforts.

A few years ago it was usual to bandage an infant tightly as soon as it was born, and keep it swathed in strips of linen, or flannel, for

many months after it was born, the bandage only giving place to petticoat bands, which were also pinned tightly round its little form; and these still later to the corset, with its stiffening of whalebone, and its lacing arranged so as to compress the figure several inches below its natural dimensions.

We smile with conscious superiority when we hear of the Chinese mothers dwarfing the feet of their daughters, but is this any worse than compressing the most vital part of the human system, persistently and systematically, from the cradle to womanhood?

Undoubtedly, a great many mothers did it most conscientiously. They really believed that it was necessary to elegance and perfection of figure—that neglecting the means to ensure a slight and delicate form would be to neglect an important duty. Chinese mothers argue in the same way to-day, and succeed exactly as American mothers did, in obtaining small feet or a slim waist at the cost of their daughter's health, activity, and usefulness.

The knowledge that traditions are not Gospel truths generally comes to us like a revelation; we welcome it as a new truth just born into the world, and wish to make every one else acquainted with it, but it is long before we can separate ourselves from the habits which have grown out of these traditions, and have become part of the unwritten law.

The point that I wish to make, therefore, is this: it is possible to think and act for oneself even upon the subject of dress, and decide for ourselves how far our time and strength should be given to it, and in what way. That is to say, making interminable yards of ruffling, in weaving countless yards of lace, or tatting, or embroidery, in wearing many colors, in every day changing the cut of one's garments, or in a minute and fastidious attention to neatness and delicacy of person and costume.

It is often asserted, and the assertion accepted, that dress is an indication of character, and upon this general assumption opinions are formed which as likely as not are erroneous in regard to individual ideas and qualities.

It is undoubtedly true that the general appearance of a person indicates the sort of persons they are, but clothing, like furniture, is so largely made for us, that the most of us have to take it at its average, without stopping to adapt

it to our personal preferences or individual tastes. If we put our strength into dressing, if we make an art of it, well and good; only let it be high art, pure art, true art, but do not spend the strength of womanhood on the acquisition of gew-gaws, on something that has no result, on a race that never can be won, and that is only disgraceful to the victor, inasmuch as it is not a contest in which genuine art and a cultivated taste are enlisted, but extravagant cost and a childish craving for novelty. I might have a great love for fine embroidery and beautiful ornamentation, yet never show it in my dress. Why? Because I could not afford or should not consider it right to put my own time and strength in it, and could not afford to buy those of other people whose faculties could be put to no better use.

The innate love of the beautiful in this regard, however, would make anything less than the fine and the harmonious distasteful to me. I should say to myself, therefore, I cannot have the fine and the true in trimming and ornaments, and I will not do myself the injustice of wearing the coarse and the false. I will not then wear any. I will dress with rigorous plainness, in as fine materials as my means will admit, and wear only such colors as will harmonize with each other, so that if my taste is not gratified by the possession of the beautiful, my sense of fitness shall not be offended by the incongruous or the incomplete.

In this case the eyes of the superficial observer would see only a sober and unnecessary plainness. More cultivated perceptions would detect the artistic truth underlying the surface, and find in the outward appearance the simple negative, not the positive expression of the soul within.

The world is full of theories about women and their dress, and one of them is embodied in the general idea that it is the business of women to be ornamental, and continually furnish a succession of charming pictures for the eyes of men to rest on. But it must be remembered that this ornamental idea is a very expensive one. The number of women who are supplied with means by which to make dress an art and themselves lay figures upon which to display millinery devices, is constantly growing smaller; the class of women who are obliged to earn their own livelihood in any of the ways which necessity wrests from

the iron hands of jealous, exacting force, is constantly larger.

The world recognizes the necessity for men to have a useful, uniform dress which shall not be in their way, in order that they may accomplish men's work; but is it any more necessary for men than for the masses of women.

In New York city alone, there are at least twenty-five thousand women whose time is all occupied in their efforts to earn a livelihood, and who are obliged to go out in heat and cold, in storm and sunshine, in the prosecution of their daily task. Many of these women are gentle in manner, refined in taste, delicate of person—but the question with them is imperatively, What kind of dress will be the least trouble and of the most service? and having found it they are compelled to adhere to it.

They not only cannot afford the money which variety in dress costs, but they cannot put the time and the strength in it which changes and studies in dress require; they are obliged to take what is placed ready to their hand, and needs the least thought and the least care to keep in order. This necessity tends towards the establishing of fixed ideas and permanent modes—a great desideratum, and one that is of incalculable value in forming character and doing good work.

The woman of character always has an idea of her own in her dress—it is never the mere reflex of the caprices of *les modes*. Insensibly it begins to be known as "her style," and is copied by persons (by far the larger number) who are destitute of thoughts or opinions of their own, and blindly follow the stronger will of other people. In this way, not unfrequently, fashions are made, and some of our best and most sensible fashions have come from the disregard of the dictates of fashion on the part of some woman, high in rank or prominent in social position, who determined to dress according to the promptings of her own judgment rather than follow the vagaries of those who work fashion as the itinerant does the puppets of a Punch and Judy show, to please the silliest and most empty-headed of its followers.

A true theory of dress subordinates it to the comfort, the convenience, the personal requirements of the wearer. Blind submission to authorities, on the contrary, subordinates health, comfort, convenience, and even grace

and beauty, to the demands of the fashion of the moment.

We look with a shrug and a curl of the lip at the hair of the beauties of a past age, drawn over cushions and piled high upon towers, erected as a sort of scaffolding or trellis-work to support it.

But is this more absurd than the "rats," the "waterfalls," the "paniers," the "tilting" hoops, and the "Grecian bends" of our day? all eagerly worn, kept alive by the young women of society until they have become synonymous with the "Girl of the Period."

It is to this young, fresh life, however, that we must look for improvement, when it has been taught to think. Put its quick perceptions, its vivid coloring, its strong emotions, its untiring activities to their best use, and we should see a new earth, a world as full of gladness as the heaven of our dreams.

As the higher education of women advances, the question of a dress for girls during their years of study, which shall require no more thought, and prove no more an obstacle to success than the dress of boys, attracts much attention. Such a dress must be simple, comfortable, and to a certain extent uniform; subject to very few changes, and composed of simple, durable material. Flimsiness, want of warmth and of adaptability, are the faults of school clothing: as the principal of a girls' college once said to me—"They must have a bracelet and a cheap silk dress, whether they have a flannel petticoat or not."

To remedy this, I repeat, girls only need to be taught to think for themselves. Ennoble plainness of dress by furnishing a high motive for it, and ninety-nine out of a hundred will emulate lay sisters in the simplicity of their costume.

It is stated that thirty young ladies in a school in Portland, have entered into a compact not to wear jewelry, silk dresses, bustles, paniers, false hair, or flimsy ornaments of any description during their stay in school.

I have written so much upon this subject during the past five years that it is not necessary to enlarge upon it now. The walking-skirt and plain blouse polonaise, belted in at the waist, affords the simplest solution to the school-dress question—or one or two skirts and a skirt waist—simply made with hems, no trimming. My object is not to furnish details of costumes, but to supply a mo-

tive strong enough to enable you and other girls to resist temptation, to strengthen the moral force within you, and enable you to dress wisely and sensibly of knowledge and your own free-will, rather than wait for the exercise of individual authority, influence, or power.

Not in the least do I wish to be understood as despising the accessories of dress for girls or women—on the contrary, I think them of the utmost importance. But let them be fitting as well as fine, in accordance with the style of the dress and the age of the wearer. A narrow ruffle, a mere line of linen collar, a neat boot and well-fitting glove, are better than yards of cotton lace and trails of ribbons for girls at school, or at home, and one who attends to these small matters and is careful to keep her under-clothing neat and in order, will generally be found conscientious in her dealings with others, and true in her friendships.

You know that a rule in arithmetic is intended to apply to other cases besides the single problem in the book which it is given to solve. It would be of very little use if we could not use it as a permanent aid to business transactions through life. Just so with regard to the principles of dress; once we are made acquainted with them, we can apply them as a test to any new suggestion, mode, or fashionable requirement, and if they are distinctly opposed to it, we may be sure that it is not good, and will not be lasting.

An imperative law of good taste, for example, demands a quiet, unobtrusive dress for the street. No matter what any one says, or what any one does, it is wrong if it infringes this principle. Yet it is common for girls and women to ask of those in whose opinion they have confidence—"What colors are fashionable for the street?" "Is white worn in the street?" "Would it do to wear a low-necked, long-trailed dress in the street?" "What kind of gloves are worn? and are white bonnets admissible for the street?"

Such questions come usually from persons remote from large cities, and unaccustomed to the usages of society. Their means do not admit, and their habits do not require, great variety in costume, but they still desire to be "fashionable;" so, when they learn from a fashion article, or through some other medium, that red or yellow is the prevailing col-

or, they insist upon having their one best dress red or yellow; and the style, color, or material that is designed and would only be worn by a really fashionable woman in the drawing-room, or by gas-light, is used in the street, at church, and on the most frequent and ordinary occasions.

There is nothing that proclaims want of thorough breeding more decisively than what is termed a "loud" style of dress in the street, or upon any very public occasion. Indoors, light materials and even fanciful styles, if they are simple, graceful and becoming, may be employed, especially for young girls, at times when work does not demand a more serviceable toilette.

But another cardinal principle of dress is fitness for the occasion. The pretty, diaphanous material that would be charming for a ball-dress, would be quite out of place at a picnic, and requires accessories for its complete effect which only wealth can procure. The young girl, therefore, who has only limited means at her command, and her future to work out, should consider dress, first, in relation to health and cleanliness, second, in relation to fitness and harmony.

Regulating her dress according to these principles, her taste will grow fine, and acquire culture from experience, reading, and observation. She may then safely exercise her taste as far as she can in the choice of what is pretty, because she will have learned that nothing is really beautiful that is not genuine, and in accord with the purpose and law of its being. Out of its place, or, in a wrong place, the thing of beauty, instead of being a joy forever, is a discord; it is the jewel in the swine's snout.

Make your dress, therefore, the expression of your truth, if not of your taste; fitted to its uses, if not to the requirements of your senses. It will not then belie you, if it does not, to superficial people, recommend you.

#### MYSTERIOUS VAULTS.

BARBADOES, the most eastern of the West Indies, is about twenty-one miles long, and is subject to great hurricanes. It is said that there is a very mysterious vault on this island, in a church-yard near the water, and that no one dares to bury their dead in it. For, strange to relate, every time this vault is opened, the coffins are found displaced in a strange way. They have frequently been re-