CHAPTER IV

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF CLOTHES

Has the reader ever observed the effect of clothes upon manners? It is amazing, and only proves how pathetically childlike human nature is.

Put any woman into a Marie Antoinette costume and see how, during an evening she will gradually take on the mannerisms of that time. This very point was brought up recently in conversation with an artist, who in referring to one of the most successful costume balls ever given in New York—the crinoline ball at the old Astor House—spoke of how our unromantic Wall Street men fell to the spell of stocks, ruffled shirts and knickerbockers, and as the evening advanced, were quite themselves in the minuette and polka, bowing low in solemn rigidity, leading their lady with high arched arm, grasping her pinched-in waist, and swinging her beruffled, crinolined form in quite the 1860 manner.
Some women, even girls of tender years, have a natural instinct for costuming themselves, so that they contribute in a decorative way to any setting which chance makes theirs. Watch children "dressing up" and see how among a large number, perhaps not more than one of them will have this gift for effects. It will be she who knows at a glance which of the available odds and ends she wants for herself, and with a sure, swift hand will wrap a bright shawl about her, tie a flaming bit of silk about her dark head, and with an assumed manner, born of her garb, cast a magic spell over the small band which she leads on, to that which, without her intense conviction and their susceptibility to her mental attitude toward the masquerade, could never be done.

This illustrates the point we would make as to the effect of clothes upon psychology. The actor's costume affects the real actor's psychology as much or more than it does that of his audience. He is the man he has made himself appear. The writer had the experience of seeing a well-known opera singer, when a victim to a bad case of the grippe, leave her hotel voiceless,
facing a matinee of *Juliet*. Arrived in her dressing-room at the opera, she proceeded to change to the costume for the first act. Under the spell of her rôle, that prima donna seemed literally to shed her malady with her ordinary garments, and to take on health and vitality with her *Juliet* robes. Even in the Waltz song her voice did not betray her, and apparently no critic detected that she was indisposed.

In speaking of periods in furniture, we said that their story was one of waves of types which repeated themselves, reflecting the ages in which they prevailed. With clothes we find it is the same thing: the scarlet, and silver and gold of the early Jacobbeans, is followed by the drabs and greys of the Commonwealth; the marvellous colour of the Church, where Beauty was enthroned, was stamped out by the iron will of Cromwell who, in setting up his standard of revolt, wrapped soul and body of the new Faith in penal shades.

New England was conceived in this spirit and as mind had affected the colour of the Puritans' clothes, so in turn the drab clothes, prescribed
PLATE VII
Fifteenth-century costumes on the Holy Women at the Tomb of our Lord.

The sculpture relief is enamelled terra-cotta in white, blue, green, yellow and manganese colours. It bears the date 1487.

Note character of head-dresses, arrangement of hair, capes and gowns which are Early Renaissance. (Metropolitan Museum.)
by their new creed, helped to remove colour from the New England mind and nature.

But observe how, as prosperity follows privation, the mind expands, reaching out for what the changed psychology demands. It is the old story of Rome grown rich and gay in mood and dress. There were of course, villains in Puritan drab and Grecian white, but the child in every man takes symbol for fact. So it is that to-day, some shudder with the belief that Beauty, re-enthroned in all her gorgeous modern hues, means near disaster. The progressives claim that into the world has come a new hope; that beneath our lovely clothes of rainbow tints, and within our homes where Beauty surely reigns, a new psychology is born to radiate colour from within.

Our advice to the woman not born with clothes sense, is: employ experts until you acquire a mental picture of your possibilities and limitations, or buy as you can afford to, good French models, under expert supervision. You may never turn out to be an artist in the treatment of your appearance, instinctively knowing how a prevailing fashion in line and colour may be
adapted to you, but you can be taught what your own type is, what your strong points are, your weak ones, and how, while accentuating the former, you may obliterate the latter.

There are two types of women familiar to all of us: the one gains in vital charm and abandon of spirit from the consciousness that she is faultlessly gowned; the other succumbs to self-consciousness and is pitifully unable to extricate her mood from her material trappings.

For the darling of the gods who walks through life on clouds, head up and spirit-free, who knows she is perfectly turned out and lets it go at that, we have only grateful applause. She it is who carries every occasion she graces—indoors, out-of-doors, at home, abroad. May her kind be multiplied!

But to the other type, she who droops under her silks and gold tissue, whose pearls are chains indeed, we would throw out a lifeline. Submerged by clothes, the more she struggles to rise above them the more her spirit flags. The case is this: the woman's *mind* is wrong; her clothes are right—lovely as ever seen; her jewels gems; her house and car and dog the best. It is her
mind that is wrong; it is turned in, instead of out.

Now this intense and soul-, as well as line-destroying self-consciousness, may be prenatal, and it may result from the Puritan attitude toward beauty; that old New England point of view that the beautiful and the vicious are akin. Every young child needs to have cultivated a certain degree of self-reliance. To know that one's appearance is pleasing, to put it mildly, is of inestimable value when it comes to meeting the world. Every child, if normal, has its good points—hair, eyes, teeth, complexion or figure; and we all know that many a stage beauty has been built up on even two of these attributes. Star your good points, clothes will help you. Be a winner in your own setting, but avoid the fatal error of damning your clothes by the spirit within you.

The writer has in mind a woman of distinguished appearance, beauty, great wealth, few cares, wonderful clothes and jewels, palatial homes; and yet an envious unrest poisons her soul. She would look differently, be different and has not the wisdom to shake off her fetters.
Her perfect dressing helps this woman; you would not be conscious of her otherwise, but with her natural equipment, granted that she concentrated upon flashing her spirit instead of her wealth, she would be a leader in a fine sense. The Beauty Doctor can do much, but show us one who can put a gleam in the eye, tighten the grasp, teach one that ineffable grace which enables woman, young or old, to wear her cloths as if an integral part of herself. This quality belongs to the woman who knows, though she may not have thought it out, that clothes can make one a success, but not a success in the enduring sense. Dress is a tyrant if you take it as your god, but on the other hand dress becomes a magician’s wand when dominated by a clever brain. Gown yourself as beautifully as you can afford, but with judgment. What we do, and how we do it, is often seriously and strangely affected by what we have on. The writer has in mind a literary woman who says she can never talk business except in a linen collar! Mark Twain, in his last days, insisted that he wrote more easily in his night-shirt. Richard Wagner deliberately put on certain rich materials in col-
ours and hung his room with them when composing the music of The Ring. Chopin says in a letter to a friend: "After working at the piano all day, I find that nothing rests me so much as to get into the evening dress which I wear on formal occasions." In monarchies based on militarism, royal princes, as soon as they can walk, are put into military uniforms. It cultivates in them the desired military spirit. We all associate certain duties with certain costumes, and the extraordinary response to colour is familiar to all. We talk about feeling colour and say that we can or cannot live in green, blue, violet or red. It is well to follow this colour instinct in clothes as well as in furnishing. You will find you are at your best in the colours and lines most sympathetic to you.

We know a woman who is an unusual beauty and has distinction, in fact is noted for her chic when in white, black or the combination. She once ventured a cerise hat and instantly dropped to the ranks of the commonplace. Fine eyes, hair, skin, teeth, colour and carriage were still hers, but her effectiveness was lessened as that of a pearl might be if set in a coral circle.