CHAPTER XXV
IDIOSYNCRASIES IN COSTUME

FASHIONS in dress as in manners, religion, art, literature and drama, are all powerful because they seize upon the public mind.

The Chelsea group of revolutionary artists in New York doubtless see,—perhaps but dimly, the same star that led Goethe and Schiller on, in the storm and stress period of their time. We smile now as we recall how Schiller stood on the street corners of Leipzig, wearing a dressing-gown by day to defy custom; but the youth of Athens did the same in the last days of Greece. In fact then the darlings of the gilded world struck attitudes of abandon in order to look like the Spartans. They refused to cut their hair and they would not wash their hands, and even boasted of their ragged clothes after fist fights in the streets. Yes, the gentlemen did this.
In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries there was a cult that wore furs in Summer and thin clothes in Winter, to prove that love made them strong enough to resist the elements! You will recall the Euphuists of England, the Precieuses of France and the Illuminati of the eighteenth century, as well as Les Merveilleux and Les Encroyables. The rich during the Renaissance were great and wise collectors but some followed the fashion for collecting manuscripts even when unable to read them. It is interesting to find that in the fourth and fifth centuries it was fashionable to be literary. Those with means for existence without labour, wrote for their own edification, copying the style of the ancient poets and philosophers.

As early as the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries Venetian women were shown the Paris fashions each Ascension Day on life-size dolls, displayed by an enterprising importer.

It is true that fashions come and go, not only in dress, but how one should sit, stand, and walk; how use the hands and feet and eyes. To squint was once deemed a modest act. Women of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries
stood with their abdomens out, and so did some in 1916! There are also fashions in singing and speaking.

The poses in portraits express much. Compare the exactly prim Copley miss, with a recent portrait by Cecilia Beaux of a young girl seated, with dainty satin-covered feet outstretched to full extent of the limbs, in casual impertinence,—our age!

To return to the sixteenth century, it is worthy of note that some Venetian belles wore patines—that is, shoes with blocks of wood, sometimes two feet high, fastened to the soles. They could not move without a maid each side! As it was an age when elemental passions were "good form," jealous husbands are blamed for these!

In the seventeenth century the idle dancing youth of to-day had his prototype in the Cavalier Servente, who hovered at his lady's side, affecting extravagant and effeminate manners.

The corrupt morals of the sixteenth century followed in the wake of social intercourse by travel, literature, art and styles for costumes. Mme. Récamier, the exquisite embodiment
of the Directoire style as depicted by David in his famous portrait of her, scandalised London by appearing in public, clad in transparent Greek draperies and scarfs. Later Mme. Jerome Bonaparte, a Baltimore belle, quite upset Philadelphia by repeating Mme. Récamier's experiment in that city of brotherly love! We are also told on good authority that one could have held Madame's wedding gown in the palm of the hand.

Victorian hoops for public conveyances, paper-soled slippers in snow-drifts, wigs immense and heavy with powder, hair-oil and fur-belows, hour-glass waist lines producing the "vapours" fortunately are no more.

Taken by and large, we of the year 1917 seem to have reached the point where woman's psychology demands of dress fitness for each occasion, that she may give herself to her task without a material handicap. May the good work in this direction continue, as the panorama of costumes for women moves on down the ages that are to come.