THE ORIGIN OF DRESS

Both he and his people were black as sloes
For the region they lived in was torrid,
And their principal clothes were a ring through the nose
And a patch of red paint on the forehead.

Thomas Hood the Younger.

In seeking the origin of dress we necessarily assume that once upon a time our primitive ancestors did not wear any clothes at all. Even nowadays, in our own country, at sports, in the ball-room, and on the stage, the garments worn, or some of them, may be reduced to the minimum that the rules of Society appear to demand. There are, moreover, two reasons why very early man did not trouble to dress: first of all, he was covered with hair like the majority of mammals; and, secondly, it is more than probable that his home was within the tropics. (See Plate I., Frontispiece.) The two ideas are quite compatible, for all the great apes—chimpanzee, orang-utan, and gorilla—which are the nearest relatives of man, have been found in the warmer regions of the world, and are well supplied with hair.

It has long been thought that the cradle of man-
kind is to be looked for in the south of Asia, and it is a striking fact that of recent years the bones of the earliest known creature that can with certainty be called a man (*Pithecanthropus erectus*) were discovered in Java. At the same time it appears that *Pithecanthropus*, although it walked erect, approximated more closely to the apes than does any more recent human being, and in making a restoration of the type in question, one would feel bound to endow it with a coat of hair. This has since been lost, and, according to Darwin, owing to aesthetic reasons, the members of one sex having chosen as mates those of the other who were the least hairy.

Man also has found his way into most parts of the globe, but he has not always acted with regard to dress in the same way in similar climates. The problem, therefore, which we have set ourselves to solve, proves to be less simple than it appeared at the outset, for great use may be made of clothes in one cold country and not in another, while they may be unknown in certain parts of the tropics, and adopted elsewhere within their radius.

Very often when it is sought to explain a matter, it is found that this can be done in two or three different ways, and it is quite possible that all of them may be correct. This fact may with advantage be borne in mind when seeking for the reasons which lead to the adoption of dress, for the first time, by any particular race.
Perhaps it will help us if we pause for a moment to consider why clothes are worn at the present day. There is no doubt but that in the case of many garments their ornamental character, real or supposed, is the first consideration. Others are chosen chiefly for protection and warmth, while, as already indicated, the rest suffice to satisfy the claims of modesty. Although the three reasons are now intimately combined, it is practically certain that any one of them is sufficient to have led to the adoption of clothes in the first place, and as if these were not enough there may be other contributing, if not actual causes.

We may now consider these matters in detail. It would seem from the study of modern peoples, who are still in a very simple state of civilization, as well as from one of the earliest drawings scratched by the cave-men who were contemporary with the mammoth in France, that ornaments are the most primitive part of dress. (See Figure 1 and Plate II.)

Generally speaking, the more simple the race, the greater is its love of ornament. The cave-man’s sketch shows a woman who is devoid of clothing, but who wears bracelets, while it is said that in the original a necklace can be traced, though owing to an injury to the fragment of bone on which the drawing was made, the head of the figure has been lost.

On the West Coast of Africa, where clothes are
A woman and a witch doctor of Central Africa, shewing the part that ornaments may play even when clothing is of the scantiest.

(From a photograph by Captain Ford.)

PLATE II.
not a necessity owing to the heat, bracelets are worn in such numbers by the native belles as to cover a large part of the forearm, while anklets rise in succession nearly to the knee. (See Plate II.) Again, in New Guinea the women of some tribes who do not indulge in a single scrap of clothing, still wear ornaments on their heads and round their necks.

![Figure 1. Drawing of a woman engraved by a cave-man. (Modified from Wilson.)](image)

There is, however, something to be advanced on behalf of savages that cannot be said for white people who bedizen themselves with jewellery, or bedeck themselves with the feathers of rare and beautiful birds. Uncivilized people have no pockets nor safes in which to keep their valuables, and it comes about that these take a form which permits them to be worn on the person, so that many of the
objects which take the place of ornaments—such as teeth, shells, and beads—serve as the currencies of their owners. Even now there are individuals of whom it is said that they “put all their money on their backs,” but, unfortunately for them, it depreciates sadly in value, and cannot be turned to account at a moment’s notice. Furthermore, one naked warrior is very much like another, and chiefs, in order that they may easily be identified, have come to wear certain ornaments just as at the other extreme with regard to covering, knights in full armour carried crests on their helmets and other devices on their surcoats and shields.

Clothes proper are of later origin, and, as we have already mentioned, would only be adopted for protective purposes after man had lost the greater part of his hairy covering.

It is probable that this had happened before the earliest settlers arrived in this country, although the cave-men made their drawings of themselves in the nude, and it is contended that the marks on their bodies are similar to those in the drawings of animals and are not mere attempts at shading, but indicate the presence of hair.

In the first place, man was a hunter pure and simple, and his clothes were made from the hairy skins of his quarry. At the present time the Eskimos are clothed in this way, and there is little doubt but that they are the descendants of the cave-men, who
made the striking drawings to which we have already alluded. Their implements, stature, and so forth, all point this way, and the fact that their clothes are merely adopted as a protection against the weather, is shown by the fact that they remove them altogether when in their huts.

We have already said that it does not always follow that even when the climate is cold, complete dress is brought into use. When H.M.S. Beagle visited South America, some of the Tierra del Fuegians wore only an otter skin or some small scrap about as large as a pocket-handkerchief. It was laced across the breast by strings, and was shifted from side to side according to the direction of the wind. Others, both men and women, wore nothing. One of the latter, who was suckling a recently born child, came alongside the vessel in a canoe, and stayed there, out of pure curiosity, while the sleet fell and thawed on her naked bosom and on the bare body of her baby.

Some races can make very passable clothes by hammering the fibres from the bark of trees into a kind of cloth, while when men took to husbandry and cultivated plants that produce fibres, they learned also to spin and weave materials from which to make their garments. The use of furs has always survived to a greater or less extent, but it is interesting to note that motoring has caused a return to primitive dress as regards external garments, for in order to
withstand the air which is met when the car is in rapid movement, fur clothes and leather suits have been introduced, the latter of course being not quite so old in type as the former. It must not be forgotten at this point that climate is not the only enemy that man has had to face, and that armour was a development of dress, intended to preserve him from the onslaughts of his own species.

We have now noticed two ways in which clothes must have been brought into use, namely, as adornments and for protection. We have still to consider the third of the obvious reasons. Modesty is a habit, or one might perhaps call it equally well a fashion, which is so widespread that some have characterized it as being an instinct, and have stated quite wrongly that it is universal. The most curious point with regard to the matter is that very different ideas of modesty prevail in various regions of the world, one part of the body being covered by some people and another by others. Besides, it by no means follows that a naked race is less chaste than one which is clothed.

Although at the present day races exist where only the men cover themselves, it is very likely that clothes worthy of the name were first worn by women, for keen observers have pointed out that men dependent on their skill and speed in the chase would hardly encumber themselves with clothes, though having comely wives they might deem it advisable for them
to be protected from the public gaze. This idea is still carried out in Eastern countries, where women cover even the greater part of their faces, and are usually secluded in a harem. As bearing out, however, what we have just said with regard to modesty, it may be mentioned that the peasant women in Egypt are perfectly happy so long as their faces and the backs of their heads are covered, and it is considered even more shameful to expose the latter than the former. The objection made not long ago to the appearance of English women in church without hats may be remembered in this connection.

Painting may often replace clothing, and members of races accustomed to decorate their bodies in this way, are much ashamed if they are seen unpainted. Tattooing also does away to a great extent with bareness, and it is obvious that unclothed black men and women never present such a naked appearance as do lighter-coloured races. In fact, a white man who bathed with a number of coloured people likened himself and his companions to an artificial, blanched, and sickly plant among its healthy dark green fellows.

Doubtless the hair of original man was coloured so as to match his surroundings, and it seems likely that the tint of his skin was reddish. We have now no need for protective colouration (except in war time), and as we do not live in the tropics, we should gain no advantage from being black; there-
fore pigment is but little developed in our skins, and it has been suggested that clothes sometimes have been adopted by white races for æsthetic reasons apart from their development from ordinary ornaments.

It seems possible, too, that man, upon realizing that he differed from other animals in having no natural covering, set about to provide himself with one.

There is, however, another contributing cause which may have led to the adoption of dress, and this depends on the action of women themselves. They may put on clothes for reasons of coquetry just as on occasion they may modify or discard them. For instance, fashion at a moment’s notice may obscure one part of the body that hitherto was obvious, and at the same time emphasize the natural outlines of others which before were hidden. Again, the bare necks and arms displayed in our ball-rooms afford another case in point.