XXXIV

IMPRESSIONS TO BE GAINED FROM DRESS

CLUES FROM CLOTHES—INDIVIDUALITY NOT DISGUISED BY THEM—MODERN DRESS OF OTHER COUNTRIES—SIGNIFICANCE OF CLOTHES

I F we turn our attention once more to clothes and their effect upon the outsider, there are questions to consider with regard to what may be judged from dress. First of all, as to the matter of social status, it must be confessed that it is very much more difficult nowadays than it was years ago to make any pronouncements from clothes, though it must be pointed out that there is a way of wearing clothes, quite irrespective of their kind, that will help us considerably in making a judgment.

The reason for the levelling up or down as the case may be, is due, of course, to the standard of luxury having been raised and the price of materials for clothing having been lowered. As regards the determination of the profession of the wearer from his or her dress, it must be said that often we remain quite at a loss in the matter. Bearing and expression and general action may again afford a clue.
Characteristic costumes are now rare. We can tell the cleric as a rule, though some, especially those who have belonged to some other profession previously, will not adopt the collarless coat of black, the choker, or the white tie.

Servants’ liveries may be left out of consideration here, but the man that has to do with horses proverbially looks “horsey.” To the list of uniforms to which we are accustomed there has been added of recent years that of the hospital nurse. The garb of various sisterhoods still catches our eye, and there are certain points which may help us occasionally in identifying a doctor, a lawyer, a schoolmaster, and an actor. According to a recent article by a detective in one of the daily papers, the characteristics and individuality of a man will show through his clothes, and the writer alluded to, suggests the putting of a clergyman into a soldier’s or a sailor’s uniform, or again, the dressing of a valet in his master’s clothes. “He will look quite different. He will give a fresh character to the clothes, and you will realize at once that he is a second-hand copy.”

Mr. Chevasse says that if you walk down Oxford Street, Piccadilly, or through the City, you may pick out the ex-army officer, in his mufti tweed, for his instinct for dress is so ingrained that it is easy to recognize him. Mr. Chevasse would tell the fashionable physician from the following signs. His frock coat, scrupulously cut, his silk hat correctly quiet,
which fit in with his sleek manners and the sang-froid of his superior knowledge. The dress dummy is another type—the man with the airs of a peacock, whose every article of dress is meant to attract attention. Of the actor whom one meets in the Strand, it is said that the odds and ends which he wears are typical of the parts he plays, but that his real individual character is not disguised as sometimes he might wish it to be.

In similar fashion we are given the points of the modern solicitor, of whom there are, we are told, two classes. The first type is dressed to exhale prosperity, and to convince the litigant that he is a safe man, but the character of his waistcoat will tell you more often than not that he robs Peter to pay Paul. The dress of other solicitors beams out sincerity, truth, reliability; the cloth is good and plain, and is well fitted to inspire trust and confidence.

At the present time so many visitors from other countries, who are sojourning here for a while or have come to stay, are to be seen in our streets, that it may be of interest to see what the Editor of the Tailor and Cutter has to say upon the subject of their dress, or so far as that of the men goes. He says that, as a rule, in the case of the members of the aristocracy of all nations, their garments give the impression of having been made in London, and are free from the peculiarities which characterize those of other countries. Generally speaking, however, it
is not difficult to tell the nationality of a man by his clothes. The American’s garments are usually made two sizes too large for him. The collar of his coat is very narrow, and the shoulders and back, on the other hand, exceedingly wide. His jackets are often extremely long, his trousers are peg-tops, finished with raised seams.

In some ways the German is a modified American, though often there is to be found a seam up the front of his coat from the waist, as he likes plenty of room about his chest, of which he makes much. While the American, however, often has his coat finished in some extraordinary way which he fancies to be original, there is a lack of personality about the German, and the uniformity of his garments would appear to be the result of his military training. The American likes a lounge suit, and the German the same, or a morning coat, while the Frenchman favours the latter or a frock coat, which he has finished off with as much ornamentation as possible in the way of silk facings, braided edges, and fantastic flaps. His garments are close-fitting, and the waist is emphasized.

The Spaniard is like the Frenchman with modifications, for his garments are tasteful and neat, with few peculiarities. In warm weather he wears no vest, and his jackets are close-fitting and finished with a low roll. In Austrian and Hungarian clothes French and German ideas seem to be skilfully
blended, while Italian dress has more of the French than of the German characters. Norwegians and Danes are like Englishmen, though there is perhaps a little more preciseness and stiffness about their clothes. The colonial has no desire for show, and his tweed lounge suit is cut for comfort and made up for strength.

The impressions to be gained from dress that we have hitherto mentioned in this chapter are chiefly those which are unintentionally given to us by their wearers. The significances which it is meant that clothes should bear are still most numerous and important.

To-day, on ordinary occasions, rank is not shown by any special dress, which those in high stations themselves wear, though the case of their servants is different. In earlier times in our history, especially under the earlier Tudors, rank was indicated in civilian dress. Now the frock coat worn by King and Peer is considered just as necessary in many businesses, and is characteristic of the shop-walker. Men of assured position can even afford to dress badly, though the poor man cannot.

Here and there we have met with survivals of class costumes (see pages 150 and 308), and to these we may add that of the costermongers, for in the dress of both men and women there are peculiarities which single them out.

In the same way we find remnants here and there
of special dresses that are characteristic of trades. The blue blouse of the butcher, the white clothes of the butterman or man cook, and the white cap of the latter are cases in point; and in connection with certain duties and modern manufactures we have special dresses. We might allude to the overalls of furriers, feather merchants, and stationers. Divers, sewage men, and miners have special dresses, and boiler cleaners have a curious dress of coat and trousers made in one, which recalls one form of the military tunic used by the Norman soldiers, which sometimes ended in closely fitting trousers. It was first drawn on the legs, and the arms were then put through the sleeves. Such combination garments are shown in contemporary drawings, and it has been questioned whether these were really made in one piece, but the artist, though he might not indicate with certainty the openings through which they were put on, is hardly likely to have left out the lines which would have made clear a division at the waist.

At the present time in England there are very little differences in the costume of single and married women, though it was once compulsory for them to dress differently. The remains, however, of the custom are to be found in plenty in foreign countries.

In many professions rank is indicated by the dress or its ornamentations. In the Army and Navy, the Church, the legal profession, such points are obvious. We have had occasion to deal with academical
costume, and in the knightly orders the same holds good. Just as an undergraduate has a stuff gown, while a graduate may have a silk one, a Proctor is given velvet sleeves and the Chancellor of the University an embroidered gown and train, so, for instance, in the order of Knights of the Order of St. John of Jerusalem, the Knight of Grace has a stuff gown, the Knight of Justice a silk one, while the Grand Prior is habited in velvet.