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• • DRESS REFORM. • •

BY THE PHILOSOPHER IN SLIPPERS (J. F. NISBET).

SOMEWHERE in the depths of the woman's movement there is a project for the adoption of a different style of dress for ladies from that now commonly worn. If gossip can be trusted, innovators are engaged at the present moment in contriving 'something in the nature of a dual garment,' other than the divided skirt, which, during all the years it has been before the world—in the mind's eye chiefly—does not appear to have won even that limited amount of approval known as a *succès d'estime*. As I am anxious to help the ladies in rationalising their dress (which has got a little off the plumb of perfect propriety), perhaps they will allow me to present them with a few elementary principles upon which alone, as it seems to me, they can hope to build securely.

FIRST, AS TO THE FAILURE OF THE DIVIDED SKIRT!

There was never a chance for that garment, because its qualities, if it had any, nay, its very existence, were known only to the wearer; and the true theory of costume, I take it, is that it is designed with an eye, much less to the necessities of the person wearing it, than to those of the looker-on. If you doubt this, ladies, try and imagine how little would remain for practical use of the boasted 'creations' of the Rue de la Paix if the human race were suddenly deprived of the single sense of sight.

The fundamental mistake made by the dress-reformers is that they assume considerations of health or comfort to come first in the solution of the problem of costume. Far before these I place the association of ideas in relation to the sexual instinct. In other words, the costume that most flatters and stimulates the idea of sex, or of the difference between the sexes, is that which is the most becoming, and, the vagaries of fashion apart, the most likely to be popular and enduring.

I do not claim any inherent fitness in this or that cut of garment for one sex or the other. Tell me what, for any reason, the ingrained custom or experience of a race has been, and I will tell you how it must feel about dress. Trousers or petticoats—it matters not which sex adopts which! The essential thing is that the dress for both sexes should not be cut to the same pattern. Hence it is that in the Orient, where women show some preference for the trouser-shape (e.g., the Turkish trousers of the princess in pantomime), the male garb tends to run into the petticoat.

In the light of these considerations let us see how the latest project of the Rational Dress Society appears, assuming that the 'something in the nature of a dual garment' is,

PLAINLY SPEAKING, TROUSERS.

I am afraid the ladies who advocate what they are pleased to call rational dress, work from their heads and not from their hearts. They are actuated by some vague hope of placing the sexes upon an equal footing, of giving woman a better chance in the battle of life, in which she is said to be handicapped by her petticoats. They also argue, perhaps, that in such a climate as ours, trousers may be a cleaner article of outdoor wear than a skirt. They may insist further that — But why enumerate the score of reasons why women should act as men, or men as women? Are they not all set forth in the advanced feminine literature of the period?

Plausible as some of the reasons may be, they do not for a moment weigh in the balance with that little principle of mine—the sexual idea and its associations. For good or evil Europe is committed to trousers as the characteristic male garment, the symbol and badge of manhood; and to the petticoat as all that is sweetly and seductively feminine. The positions might have been reversed. They may still be reversed; for if women insist upon wearing the male garment *par excellence*, men in self-defence will be driven to the petticoat.

Now, do the ladies of the Rational Dress Society realize

what a potent charm and attraction they are asking their sex to renounce in

THE FAMILIAR PETTICOAT,

and what sentimental difficulties and drawbacks would be created by an adoption of the proposed dual garment in its place? I cannot think they do realise these things, otherwise this mischievous agitation in favour of men's clothes for women would never have been heard of.

That the race would run any risk of becoming extinct through the carrying out of the scheme, I do not say. If the only woman there was to love insisted upon wearing trousers—well, we should have to love her and make the best of it; and in due time a new set of associations would grow up around this garment—no longer then 'unmentionable,' but a source of inspiration, emulation, and high resolve; and women, to do them justice, with the aesthetic sense of their sex, would, no doubt, slash it, and frill it, and puff it, and embroider it, and make it a very presentable garment indeed, as unlike the original pattern as it could well be. But the change would mean a revolution in sentiment and poetry, which it would take twenty years to effect, and meanwhile a whole generation of women would be jeopardising their chances of the Higher Love. Twenty years do I say? Perhaps fifty!

What, then, is rational dress? I should say that rational dress was that which, without exposing or revealing too much of the female figure, suggested it to the best advantage. Stays there must be; because these now participate to a great extent in the poetic associations of the petticoat. The pointed shoe has almost established itself. I am not sure that the French heel, bad as it is on every common-sense ground, is not getting to be unassailable by dint of its association with pretty feet and well-turned ankles. There are many features of fashionable dress which, in the cold light of reason, are not to be defended, but which hold their own by association. Even the bishop sleeve will have its chance of 'catching on' if it stays long enough.—P. M. B.



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