

REMARKS ON FEMALE DRESS AND FASHIONS.

ADDRESSED TO THE EDITOR.

As you are accustomed to give to the article of dress a very distinguished place in your monthly publication, it is hoped that you will not reject a few remarks on a subject of so much importance as a national concern. I call it a national concern, because I believe that the dress and the morals of a nation are very much dependent on each other; that a nation may be partly judged of, as to character, by the style of dress prevailing; and that an excessive desire of decoration brings on a proportionate corruption of morals, wherever and whenever it exists.

Having lived above half a century, I have had opportunity of seeing proofs of the truth of this observation, which I produce, by no means as a new one, but as one ap-

parently forgotten. I was born at a time when the extravagance of absurdity was nearly exhausted; when the ladies were shaking off their hoops, and slowly and reluctantly resuming their natural forms. It may be remembered that our national morals were then at a very low ebb. Many great men and worthy and zealous matrons were roused to take up the pen in the cause of virtue and common sense, in various ways; and the effect of their efforts was in a few years evident, in the restoration of a simply elegant style of dress. The tide of thought was turned, in a great measure, from the decoration of the person to the cultivation of the mind, which in females had been long neglected. Many admirable works were published with a view to direct

the ambition of the sex to worthier aims, to the cultivation of the mental powers, and the regulation of the temper and affections, to fit them for the duties of the mother, the companionable wife, and the respectable head and manager of a family.

A happy change in society ensued—nor was the whole success to be attributed to these writers; the domestic virtues were recommended by example and encouragement in a quarter so elevated as to ensure the success of its influence. And it is with confidence that the well-wisher of her sex in the present day beholds the dignified simplicity and disdain of pomp which now occupies the same high station, and gives an example of rational enjoyment, in hospitality and condescension, highly worthy of imitation from one end of our country to the other. I live in hope of seeing a second reformation in our land, and cannot but wish that the ambition of my own sex may be again aroused to exercise that influence which Nature has allotted to it. Did women know their own true dignity, they would not give to men so much ground to charge them with frivolity and childish love of baubles. It is hoped that nine-tenths of the followers of the butterfly fashions of the day have too much taste to admire them, and are only led by a supposed necessity to appear like their companions.

I would fain ask, why the office of setting the fashions is left to the French milliner. At the time of the reform I have before alluded to the leading beauties of fashion took this office, and the superiority of their taste was soon perceived: the Grecian draperies were imitated, and the human form was suffered to appear with grace and decency where the cultivated mind was found. Yet every mode is liable to be abused by the uninformed and coarse-minded; but, in the present state of fashions, the milliners must be the only admirers. If any attempt to please the other sex, by dress, was ever made, which I would not for the world assert to have been the case, it is very certain that the present costume cannot have that effect; for, in private, men of all tastes and ages declaim against the flutter of the times.

It may not be amiss to observe, that a degree of singularity and plainness is often ventured on by such as have bestowed much time upon the cultivation of

their minds, and who have raised themselves above the comments of the thoughtless; and it is to be hoped that their examples will be quickly followed by such as see and lament the absurdity, in part, prevailing.

I would fain put in a plea for those females whose age must make them desirous of some more sober habit. Surely the taste of the young might be employed to advantage in devising some less ornamental head-dress for their grandmothers, if their mothers are too young to wish for such. Surely Nature gives us many hints on the subject. When the first bloom of youth is past, and all our pains on outward decoration are vainly lavished to detain the look of admiration, the truest art lies in relinquishing it with a good grace, and veiling, in the thickening folds of drapery, the changes which we cannot avert. And still wiser has that fair one been who, looking forward to this period, has betimes sweetened the temper, and laid in a store of wisdom and intelligence, which shall make her society more coveted in maturity than it was in youth. The general neglect of this has brought on age so fixed a prejudice, that experience is deprived of all power to raise the warning voice, and, consenting to its own degradation, is doomed to look on in silence, and see the thoughtless hurrying into follies, whose end is bitterness and disappointment. If you will occasionally give utterance, through the medium of your work, to the sentiments of the writer of this paper, it is hoped that the friendly truths which she would impart, in the language "more of sorrow than of anger," might be well received by some among your readers. Some might have ambition enough to rise to higher and more worthy aims. If it were shown that vanity and virtue are two adverse mistresses, striving to divide the sex, and that, as we draw towards the one, we must forsake the other, they might be tempted to look forward to the different ends to which they lead. The poet has described them both:

"See how the world its veterans rewards!
A youth of folly, an old age of cards;
Fair to no purpose, artful to no end;
Young without lovers, old without a friend;
A fop their passion, and a fool their lot;
Alive ridiculous, and dead forgot."

His beautiful description of a woman, such as Heaven designed her to be, cannot

too often be set before the mind's eye; though old, it must ever retain its charms; and so might every female who could be tempted to imitate it. I select a few lines best suited to my purpose:—

“ Ah, friend, to dazzle let the vain design:
To raise the thought, and fix the heart, be
thine;
To rule the temper, whose unclouded ray
Can make to-morrow cheerful as to-day.”

A woman of this disposition, the poet proceeds to tell us,

“ Charms by accepting, by submitting sways,
And has her humour most when she obeys:
Be this a woman's fame: with this unblest,
Wits live a scorn, and beauty dies a jest.”

Here the two mistresses before alluded to are well described; and, did the young but pause a moment, and consider which it were wiser to engage with, surely few professing rationality would enter the fruitless service of vanity. When it is farther considered that the subject of personal decoration has been made the theme of admonition, both by the prophet and the apostle, a little consideration will satisfy us that it is of more importance than some are willing to allow. If it engages the thoughts, which should be fixed on better things; if it engrosses the time which is lent us for better purposes; and if it claims that wealth, equally lent to us for the good of our poorer neighbours; it cannot be said to be productive of little evil in the world. It was asserted by a novel-writer of the last century, that “the poor might be clothed out of the trimmings of the rich.” Might not the same be said, and with equal truth, at the present day?

Nor are these the only persons de-

frauded of what Providence designed for them by the unrestrained passion for dress and show. Innumerable cases daily prove that distress and failure overwhelm those who furnish our vanities by a long delayed payment. It is to be presumed that the conscience of every individual so contributing to national distress must have felt many drawbacks from the pleasure of shining the gayest of the gay. A very striking picture of the distress thus caused has been given by Hannah Moore in her “*Cœlebs in search of a Wife*,”—a work which did much good in its day, by the many strong and faithful delineations of character, though, perhaps, the consistency of the story might not bear a critical examination. It points out many errors to which we are all liable; and, by those who seek instructive helps to the formation of their characters, it cannot be read in vain.

I have intruded longer on your attention than I at first designed: but I find my subject to be a root from which so many branches spring, that each would occupy some pages, if duly examined and set out to view. Should you think these remarks worthy of insertion in your Magazine, I may again venture to enlarge upon the higher subjects arising from it.

As my sole object in offering these remarks is the good of society in general, and experience is all the qualification I can boast, if my authorship should be found defective, I trust to the liberality of the critic, and plead that I am below his notice, having studied nothing but the formation of character in myself and others.

A TRUE FRIEND TO MY SEX.