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## What is the Limit of Decency in Woman's Dress?

The Startling Summer Outburst of Slit Skirts, X-Ray Gowns, Diaphanous Waists and "Chemises Exposed" Judged by Philosophers and Preachers



"The usual costume in which respectable continental Europeans bathe is never considered improper although it exposes far more than any slit skirt." Photo Taken at Ostend.

By Rev. George W. Grinton  
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THE immodest dress and unbecoming poses of young women often goad young men to fury. If a girl escapes the flames, the man does not, for nine times out of ten he makes his way to the Red Light or the White Light district. Who is to blame? No reasonable person can have any doubt about the answer.

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RECENT startling innovations in women's dress have inevitably attracted the attention of preachers and guardians of public morality. These moral leaders have felt compelled to denounce the fashions they have seen as luring young men into bad habits and even to ruin.

Eccentric fashions and daring exposures have followed one another with such rapidity that in this Summer season we must ask ourselves, How far is this to go? Women of the most refined society wear skirts moderately slashed at the ankles. Young girls of less social position, thinking to make themselves popular, have their skirts slashed still higher. We have heard it said that if New York girls wear skirts slashed to the knee, Chicago girls will wear them with two slashes higher than the knee.

A remarkable fashion called the "chemise exposee" has found many followers. It is designed to reveal a garment that we always thought was meant to be concealed. Still more outrageous is the so-called "X-ray gown," which was worn quite conspicuously at that breeding place of fashions, the Chantilly races in France.

This costume is certainly more startling than any slashed skirt can be. It has elements of violent surprise. Seen in one light it appears perfectly staid, while in another it offers a revelation that fairly takes the breath away. Such things as these merit the attention of philosophic sociologists and should be discussed rationally and not in a spirit which would seek to suppress the color, decoration and innocent gaiety of life. Certainly the young man of to-day living in a great city is exposed to extraordinary temptations. The cost of living makes home life, with its simple pleasures, unattractive or impossible to attain. The youth is drawn towards external amusements, which soon come to spell dissipation. It is a wicked shame, we are told, that the dress of ostensibly respectable women should give him an extra impulse in the wrong direction.

Let us ask ourselves in the light of philosophy how far a woman is justified in following new fashions that expose the person and how far the present fashions are a cause of demoralization. After examining all the facts and arguments I have come to these conclusions:

1. That modesty is an outgrowth of conventions.
2. That prevailing fashions, in as far as they work havoc with the conventions in which we have been reared, are immodest.
3. That fashions found immodest under the second head are a cause of demoralization.



"A costume greatly abbreviated at the upper end causes no shock at a fashionable evening affair and probably does no harm."

To be more precise on one important point, a woman should never wear anything which startles her friends or the public. Exposure which excites no surprise is harmless. We will now apply philosophic methods of inquiry. As to the first point involved—that of modesty—it must be said, from the philosophical point of view, that it is an extremely complex and contradictory quality. So many elements enter into it that the same situation or the same act may prove to be either the very essence of propriety or the gravest offense against decency. It all depends. Maude Adams, for example, as Peter Pan, may display her "nether limbs" on the stage to thousands every night without for a moment even raising a suggestion of impropriety. But let her appear on the street in the same costume, thinly veiled with a skirt of filmy silk, and her reputation for modesty would be gone within an hour.

The fact is that although we associate modesty with clothing, modesty is not primarily nor essentially a matter of clothing at all. Conversely the mere quantity or style of clothing is not in itself a safe index to the modesty of the wearer. When custom prescribes or occasion demands, the amount of concealment afforded by clothing may vary within extremely wide limits without offending decency. The woman who escapes from a burning building clad only in her night dress, or perhaps with the very last thread of clothing burned from her body, is every whit as modest as the woman who is gowned from head to foot. It is asserted by students of ethnology that among savage tribes, where practically no clothing whatever is worn, the women in their own peculiar way exhibit as keen a sense of modesty as is to be found



"A suggestive contrast between a modest gown and an exaggerated form of the slashed skirt." Photo Taken at the Actors' Society Fair in London.

in any civilized country. A traveler in Central Australia states that when he desired to take a photograph of a group of young women they were very coy at the proposal to remove their scanty garments, and retired behind a wall to do so; but once in a state of nudity they made no objection to exposure to the camera. The distinction made by these women may seem an exceedingly fine one from our point of view. But what shall we say of the woman who exhibits genuine embarrassment when a gust of wind exposes the stocking under her walking skirt, but who an hour later may be seen extended her full length on the beach clad in a bathing suit? This comparison affords a convincing illustration of the fundamental fact of ethics, that in the last analysis morals are nothing more nor less than customs. Whatever sanction morals may later derive from what we are pleased to call absolute right, the fact remains that in ethics "whatever is is right." In its origin modesty was an instinct based on fear, prompting the individual to protect her body from the approach of a stranger. In the course of time the only protection needed by the woman was that against the sight of the stranger, and inasmuch as clothing came to sym-

bolize this protection, modesty is the characteristic of the person who avails herself of this protection and conforms to conventional ideas of dress so far as they concern the exposure of her body to disrespectful glances. Modesty as we know it today is only an outgrowth of conventions. If we accept this definition of modesty, we are, however, forced to say that many of the recent innovations in woman's dress as well as the movements of the turkey trots and tango dances are distinctly immodest. Woman herself has decreed that only a very limited portion of her figure shall be exposed to public gaze. She adopted the fig-leaf apron of her own volition, and her daughters in various climes have made whatever additions they pleased to the original outfit. In our own country the limits of exposure are well defined, although varying considerably with the occasion. Esthetic considerations reduce the upper limits in the ballroom. Convenience and freedom of movement curtail the lower limits in the interest of the woman athletically inclined. A rainy day we complacently allow to play havoc with all our traditions. But with these and other minor exceptions, the requirements of modesty in dress are pretty definitely fixed, and may not be transgressed with impunity. So far we have been concerned only with establishing the fact that immodesty in dress and social amusements actually exists. The important consideration then is to



"The so-called X-ray skirt from Paris is the climax of all these extravagances." Photograph Taken at Chantilly Races.

find out the exact nature of the harm that arises from it. It is conceivable, if modesty means only conformity to the conventions of dress, that any style might become modest by being adopted by a sufficiently large number of women, and this is what has actually happened in many instances. But it happens that the practices we are discussing here touch the very heart of social life. The human form, both male and female, is admittedly beautiful from the artistic point of view, and if esthetic enjoyment alone resulted from its display, the matter would not be a serious one. But through the mechanism of instinct, which is a part of our original nature and beyond the conscious control of any human being, however good his intentions may be, the beauty of the human figure is inseparably associated with the sexual impulse, and it is the uncontrollable strength of this impulse that is the cause of much of our social woe. If the effect produced by a woman who appears improperly clothed in public places were confined to her own circle of acquaintances little harm would be done. In fact, familiarity with her real virtues might completely counteract any harmful influence. But, unfortunately, the effect is more far-reaching. Every indication of immodesty on the part of a woman tends to break down in every man who sees her that instinctive respect for the sex as a whole which constitutes its strongest safeguard against insult. There is little wonder, as has been pointed out so frequently by writers on this subject, that so many women are treated with scant courtesy in public places. The growing disrespect for women is an evil for which they themselves are in large part responsible. Nor is it an extension of the harm that may result to say, as many well meaning women do say, that even though they may adopt the styles that are under criticism, they do not carry them to extremes. By a peculiar psychological process the power of suggestion grows stronger in proportion as the actual reality is kept in the background. When little is left for the imagination to work upon, interest largely fails. When limits are exceeded, the feeling of disgust enters as a saving factor. And so it will be that the woman who carries her audacity to extremes is doing less real harm than her more conservative sister. It is an interesting question whether, because of our quickened social conscience, we have just become more sensitive about an evil already existing, or whether we are face to face with a new situation, the tendency of which is to further confirm our traditional belief in the delightful inconsistency of woman.