

On the Fitness of Things, and of Dress in particular.

A MISSIONARY of long experience has written: "The first visible difference between a heathen" (a heathen of tropical climes, be it understood) "and a Christian, is, that the Christian wears some clothing, and the heathen wears none"; and then he goes on to relate, that "some determine the extent of their Christianity by the amount of the clothing they can carry." Our civilization in the matter of dress and adornment seems scarcely to have reached a higher point than the Christianity of the South Sea Islander. Certainly, if the development of the sense of fitness is to be looked for as a result of education, one cannot but feel that the increased facilities for learning have not yet taught women to apply it to their dress. Who, looking round on a company of British women, can fail to be struck by the variety and complexity of their clothing, and also by the entire want of suitability, or fitness, in the dress and ornament of the majority.

For the working girl of this country the first consideration seems to be how near she can get to what she is pleased to consider the fashion, especially in head gear. She has no regard at all for what is either convenient for her work, or suitable for her station. Unfortunately, the cheap and nasty in dress and millinery is too easily procured; every six months a hat at least must be got, of the newest shape, and the young woman sallies forth on Saturday and Sunday, perfectly satisfied that she is fulfilling the whole duty of woman by eclipsing some of her friends who are not so "stylish" as herself.

It is not the workgirl only who allows the glamour of fashion to blind her to what is really fitting for her station in life. Quite as deplorable and much more pathetic is the case of the "poor lady" who with small means tries to keep up appearances; who, buying cheap material, tries with unskillful fingers to model and remodel her clothes on the lines of the fashion plates, and only succeeds in making herself more weary and worn by her hours of sewing and worry over garments which, when done, accentuate their poverty by their assumption of fashion. If the just proportion of her income to be spent by Miss Smith (who dusts her own rooms, and only in very wet weather affords a tram or 'bus fare) on a summer dress amounts to 30s., why does she try to make a gown on the lines designed to cost £20 for Mrs. Midas, who never sees a duster, and goes out in a carriage? What is suitable for the one cannot possibly be suitable for the other, and as the material must be 75 per cent.

inferior, the effort must in every way result in failure.

No doubt the love of adornment is inborn in woman; but the question comes to be, What does truly adorn? Surely, the girl who lives in a smaller room, and eats poorer food, in order to buy hats in the fashion; the decayed gentlewoman who toils and slaves to change the cut and trimming of her poor gown, would be better adorned by the improved health that better food and more air would give them, than by tawdry finery and pitiable imitation of the wealthy and luxurious. One might apply to such cases Ruskin's words: "It is possible to direct labour to the objects of life till too little is left for life." The workhours, already long, are voluntarily extended, and the too narrow breathing space is made still narrower by the effort after the mistaken ideal in adornment. "What is fit, is fair," and naught that is unfitting can, in the true sense, be "fair" or suitable. I have no wish that women, the poor as well as the rich, should cease to think about their dress; I do desire that they should think truly and justly, for not till they do, will "the great and subtle art of dress" add joy and beauty to life. No woman would blindly follow fashion if she really thought seriously on the Ethics of dress. No doubt, individuality will come out, and even the fashion-plate style of dressing takes its modification from the wearer; but there ought to be some more radical connection than is usual between the mind of the wearer and the clothes and adornment worn. It seems to me that what is needful is that each woman should cultivate a true sense of what in dress will be the expression of her individual life and work: therein would lie the "subtle art of dress" in the widest sense. And, in thus impressing on externals the stamp of our inner life, must certainly lie the true dignity of all dress worn as distinctive of a profession, notably, the uniform of a Nurse.

The profession of a Nurse is one which, rightly followed, engrosses time, attention, and interest. Therefore, in her dress, she adopts a certain sameness, so that it does not require alteration with its attendant thought and waste of time. Her movements must be quiet and deft; so she avoids trimming and ornament as likely to impede her. It is necessary she should be spotlessly clean, so an apron, which can be frequently washed, is worn; cuffs at the wrists for the same reason; a cap to cover her hair and preserve it from dust. Out of doors, a cloak and bonnet are chosen for the same reasons as the cap and apron. The Nurse who realizes the reasonableness of her dress will wear it to her convenience and comfort, quietly and soberly as befits her calling, and, in so wearing it because it is "fitting," she will be pleasant to the eyes that rest on her—"fair" and harmonious.

Alas! it is to be feared that only a small pro-

[previous page](#)

[next page](#)