

Must we belong to our time?

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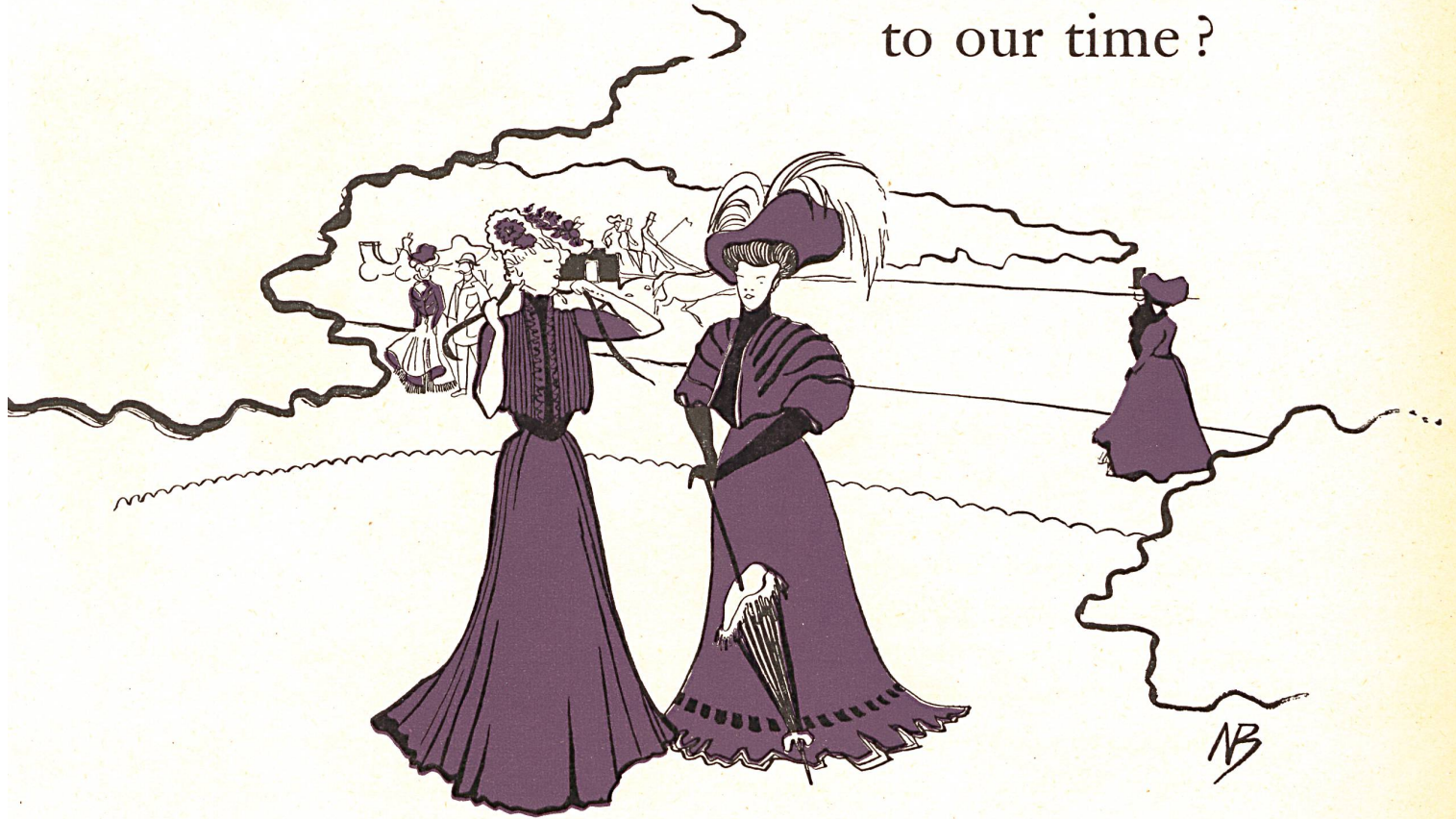
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Must we belong to our time ?



In the now abandoned mansion of Jeanne LANVIN, at the back of a lumber-room, there must still exist a Richard's apparatus which shows the photographs taken with the « verascope ». I remember the whole series of racing pictures which I was so very fond of in my childhood.

Every Sunday after lunch, my aunt Jeanne LANVIN and my mother left for Longchamp, Auteuil or Chantilly. On the day of the « Drags », they wore long foamy dresses and on the top of their hair, worn in a chignon, veiled and flowered hats looking like enormous wedding-cakes. Their double phaeton, a monumental Lorraine-Dietrich, carried them slowly away: my eyes were then filled with the whole luxury of the world. I admired the muslin, the veils, the fine gloves and the long-handled parasols, the fragrance of irises which floated around them, all the refinement of the Parisienne before 1914.

Sometimes, when the ladies'maid was putting away the lingerie, confused and blushing I caught a glimpse of the chemisettes, the petticoats and the panties trimmed with Irish lace, tied together with ribbons of pastel shades. If, by any chance, I was allowed to join the party going to the Races, I saw the procession of all those fabulous people, pale ladies in sweeping skirts and gentlemen with grey toppers, their binoculars over their shoulders.

One day the Princess Ghika, the former Liane de Pougy, paid a visit to Jeanne LANVIN. Rustling with froufrous, she was accompanied by two little black servants.

That was the time when the lovely face of the beautiful Madame Chéruit appeared in the albums of the « haute couture » ; when Poiret tried to satisfy his eccentricity and gave parties with champagne fountains at Butard's ; when Doucet was the arbiter of elegance ; when Diaghilev introduced us to

the Russian Ballet; when life was said to be marvellous or, at any rate, gay; when my parents returned from the « Abbaye de Thélème » on Christmas Eve as loaded with party favours as Santa Claus; when the beach-promenade of Trouville was very « chic »; when women were creatures of luxury, frivolous, ruinous and fascinating.

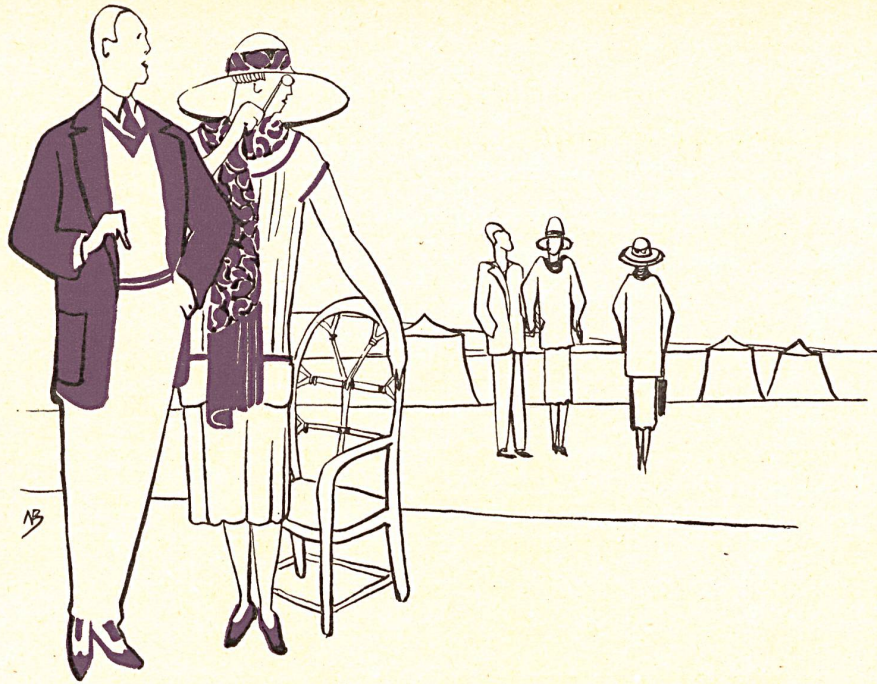
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Then came the war of 1914. With it Woman changed into nurse, housewife and businesswoman. She began to wear shorter skirts and discovered suffering, death and responsibilities. A new type of woman appeared in the night-clubs around the Opera, in rue Caumartin or rue Edouard-VII. Free in demeanour, she had boots like an aviator and no longer wore corsets. While the men were away, she discovered cocktails and her real self.

I began to forget the ladies of my childhood and to admire the women of my adolescence, those I was going to love during the troubled post-war period, with their very short dresses, their waist-lines at the knee, their short, smooth hair, their cigarette-holders, their « garçonne » appearance, their simple straight figures and, already, their sun tan.

Because I was very young, I looked upon the photographs of 1909 or 1912 as if they were pictures of another century. The sight of those shaved napes, covered with growing short cropped hair, seemed to me supreme delight; those grotesque dresses of 1925, which made women look like matured and shapeless little girls, filled me with ecstasy.



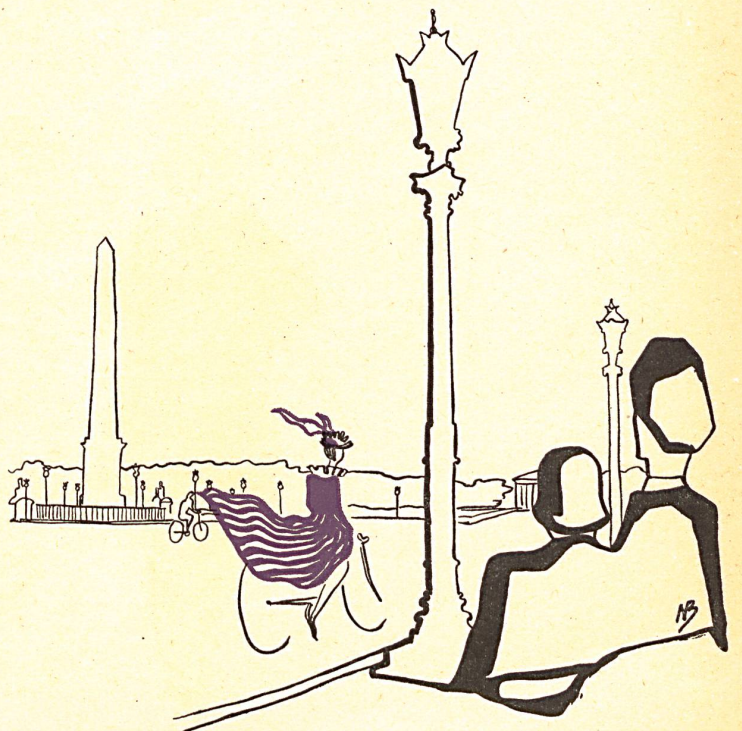


No more vaporous dresses; forgotten the froufrous; plain and prosaic underwear!

Woman's body changed with fashion. It no longer possessed a waistline and had hardly any bosom; women were flat, almost masculine. The Dolly Sisters seemed sublime. They drove their own cars. It was a day of pride when the dancer Rahna picked me up in her white 5 HP Citroën on the Champs-Élysées. I watched the arrival at my family's « maison de couture » of Jane Renouard, Yvonne Printemps or Regina Camier, whose beautiful right breast was drawing the whole of Paris to the « Cocu magnifique ». I saw them park their cabriolets without difficulty and enter the fitting room, where I was admitted once they had put on their dresses. They were still « grandes coquettes », simpler in appearance but always glamorous with discreet make-up and perfume, gleaming nails and perfectly painted lips.

* * *

And the years went by. There came the last war. With it the worries of the days of shortage, the underground, the bicycles, the wooden and cork soles, the imitation fabrics. The generation of women prior to 1939 went on caring for their appearance. But the young girls, having just passed the awkward age, showed another new feminine type which, unfortunately, was going to predominate. The young theatrical set who came to the fittings now had greasy faces, unpainted lips, no powder. Their long sleek hair hung around in disorder. Some of them came in slacks to the Faubourg Saint-Honoré in the middle of the



day. It was no longer necessary to leave the room when they undressed. And yet the most decent among them wore only panties, brassiere and suspender belt under their dress. Manicurists and chiropodists could have earned little money from them. Nevertheless the boys were delighted. I realised that I had really grown old. At that moment I began to wonder whether we ought to belong to our time.

* * *

In my opinion the feminine problem remains the same throughout all ages, and women who do not understand this are wrong. Without any doubt fashion, living conditions and also the budget must be taken into consideration. Who to-day could wear that real, transparent linen which creased in an hour? But if woman forgets her role of charm, if she no longer cares to please, if she indulges and accepts in such an inexplicable way to-day's masculine aberrations, it is because she tries to commit suicide. And that is why I refuse to belong to my time, to pass out at the sight of the youth of Saint-Germain-des-Prés, why I prefer the fragrance of perfume to the odour of ill-washed bodies, why I feel slightly melancholy, as many of my contemporaries do, in thinking of the flower-like women of my childhood, why I like crackling silk, foaming organdies, neat coiffures and graceful hats. I am certainly speaking the language of an old man, but I am not the only one to do so. Because after a healthy swim there is always time for a summer dress, after the ski-trousers, the cocktail-dress, and after a tiring day there are the comfortable house-dresses or the sumptuous swirl of an evening dress. For any hour of the day there is the reward for the troubles of man, I mean the contemplation of women that play their part, the part of beauty.

That is why I am willing to belong to my time, but with full reserves.

J. Gaumont-Larvin.

