

Fashions in the Fifties

Suppose it is a wintry evening of December in the fifties. Burlington, or any other Iowa city, is alive with people and the gay Christmas spirit. Society is on the verge of a brilliant season. It is the time of year when balls and parties are the order of the day — and night.

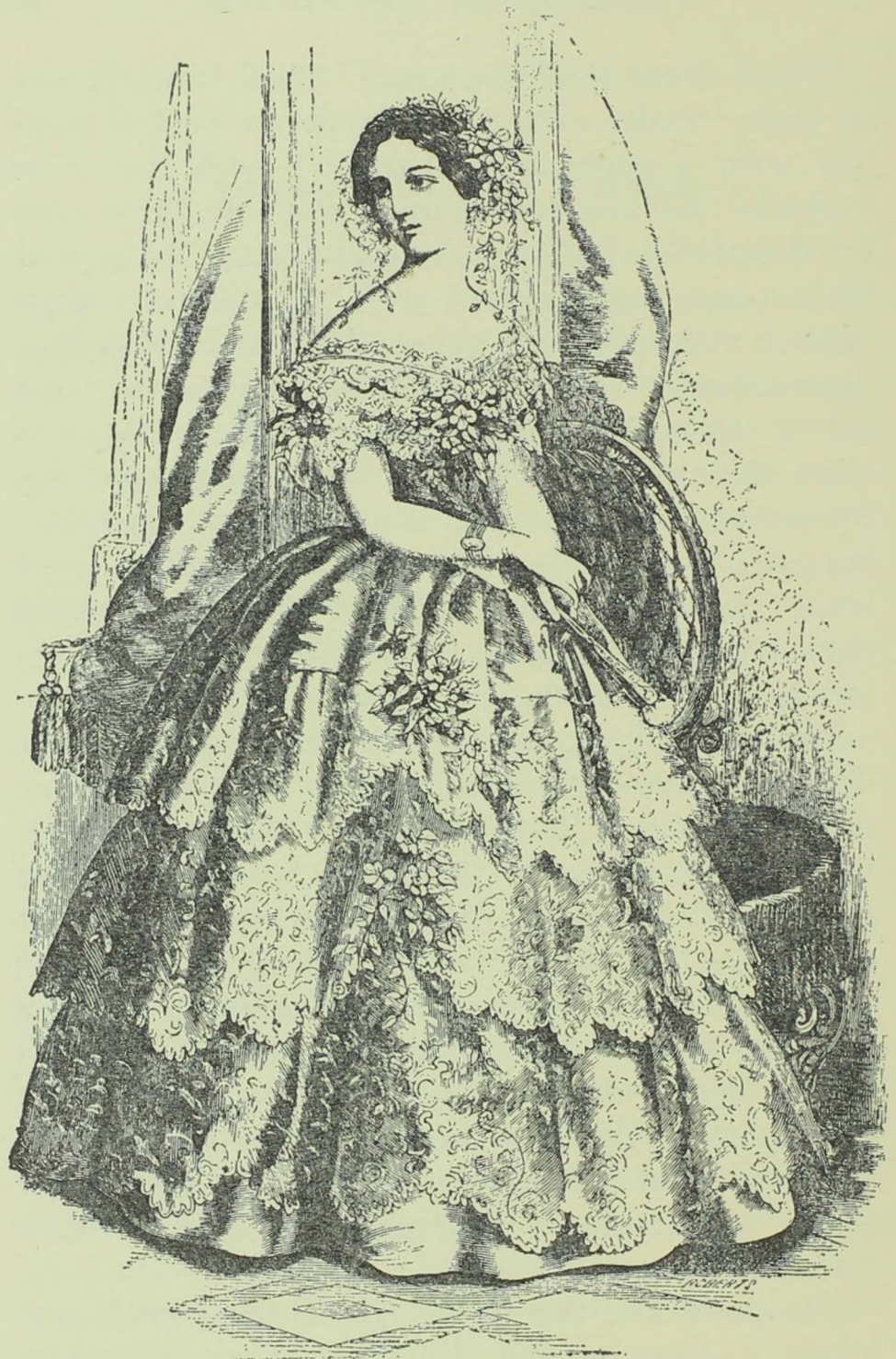
Milady of fashion hurries into her chamber all a-bustle. She has been delayed in her shopping downtown because of the Christmas crowds. Here it is six o'clock and the ball begins at eight. To milady this is the most important social event of the season. It may be a formal reception for Governor Grimes, perhaps it is a celebration of some civic achievement, or, more likely, it is the occasion of an announcement of some lady's engagement or the début of a popular débutante.

A good thing that Mary had laid out her clothes while milady was gone! As quickly as possible she takes off her afternoon dress. Off comes petticoat after petticoat and at last the brass hoops are removed. These are replaced by a bodice-shaped, sleeveless waist with whalebones in it which is combined with a short, skirt-like garment containing whalebone hoops. Several petticoats, highly starched, are tied into place and then she is ready for the dress.

Which dress shall she wear? Shall it be the one of white "moire antique" (a superior kind of thick silk with a watered appearance) with the three "blonde" flounces looped up at one side, three rows of "blonde" (a kind of silk lace) around the neck of the corsage, and trimmed with "clusters of orange flowers with branching sprays"? The black taffeta dress trimmed with the black lace flounces, the black velvet "berthé", and the velvet flowers does not seem appropriate. Perhaps she should select the "dress of satin, of a rich deep American primrose hue, the skirt made plain and very full, *en petit train*", trimmed with a "fulling" of satin ribbon the same color as the dress, a "fall", or ruff, of white lace around the neck. Should she wear it?

No, she will wear the white dress. It has more flowers on it and the head-dress to be worn with it is more becoming! Then she must wear a white tulle under-dress over the petticoats before the skirt proper is fastened on. The basque, or bodice, is put on last—the basque made beautiful with the "blonde" around the low, heart-shaped neck and a bouquet of orange flowers at the point of the neck line in front and at the right shoulder. The basque is pointed at the front and back, not too sharply. How beautiful is the sweeping skirt with the three dainty white "blonde" flounces, the top two draped up with the orange flowers!

The pattern of this rather typical party gown was similar to morning and afternoon dresses, yet a sec-

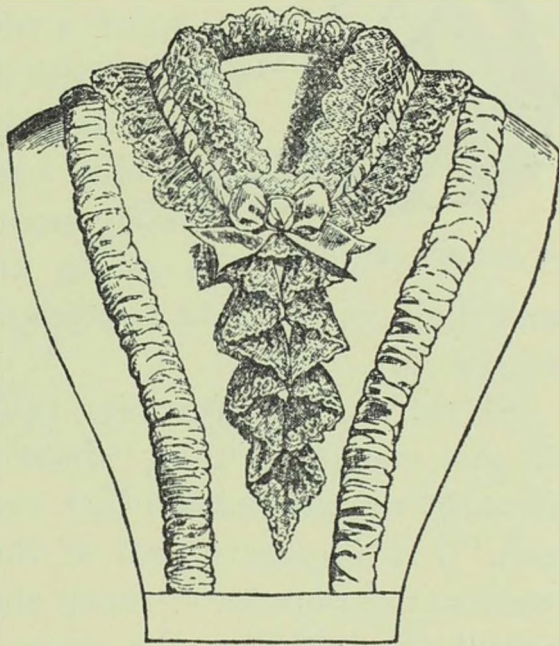


A PARTY GOWN OF 1854

ond glance would reveal obvious differences. The evening dress was made of more beautiful and costly material; it was trimmed luxuriantly with lace, fringe, flowers, marabout, or ribbons; there were no sleeves; and the "chemisette" of common dresses was also lacking.

The "marquise" waist, so universally worn in the decade of the fifties, was a tight-fitting basque with a heart-shaped neck that formed a point in the front and back—sometimes as low as the waist line.

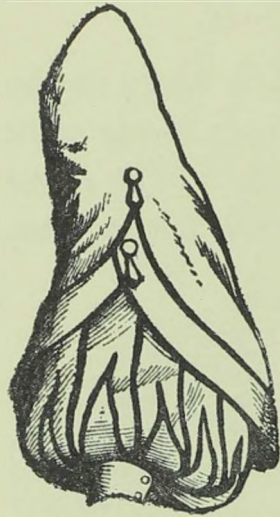
With such a waist a lace "chemisette" was usually worn. A "chemisette" was really another waist without sleeves, something like the "guimpe" of later times. The "marquise" waist was very popular for a long time because it "could be made to answer the purpose of full or plain dress by a change of chemisettes and undersleeves."



A PLAIN CHEMISETTE

The "pagoda" sleeve was the popular type of the decade. It was "demi-long" with a very full under-

sleeve, sometimes caught in to a tight band at the wrist, sometimes left free. These undersleeves were made from various materials, sometimes the same as the dress and sometimes different. Laces



A PAGODA SLEEVE

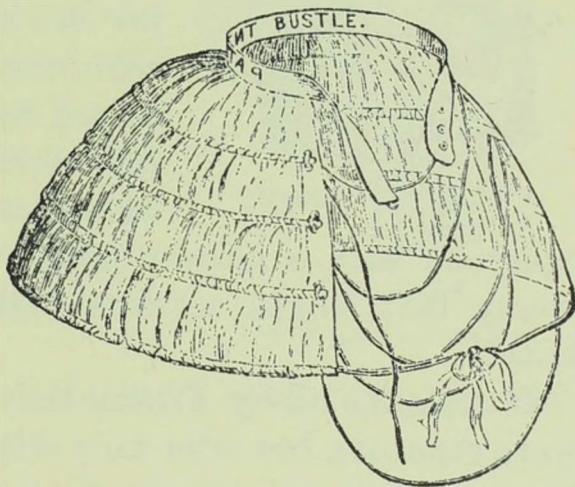
and embroidery were much in vogue. Plain materials were frequently tucked, plaited, and gathered so as to keep the type from becoming monotonous.

The skirt usually had three flounces on it. If it was not flounced, a favorite ornament was used to trim the sides of the front seam from the waist down. For every-day use, however, and particularly among the poorer people, the skirts were made as simple and plain as possible and yet simulate the fashions of the day.

Skirts were always very full — although in 1850, it was remarked that “dresses are made several flounces narrower than last year, and more numerous.” In the early part of the decade hoop skirts were not so popular — many starched and crinolined petticoats fulfilling the same function with much more rustling. In 1856 one magazine stated, however, that “in spite of our prediction to the contrary, we are constrained to admit that Hoops are increasing in favor, diameter, and number”, the most approved mode being to place one hoop mid-way from

the top to the bottom of the underskirt, and two others above this. These were arranged so that the several pieces of whalebone of which each was composed slid over each other, making a complete circle or leaving a gap in front. Either manner of adjustment made the dress more pliable. To hold the outer skirt down, a heavy cord was inserted in the bottom of it.

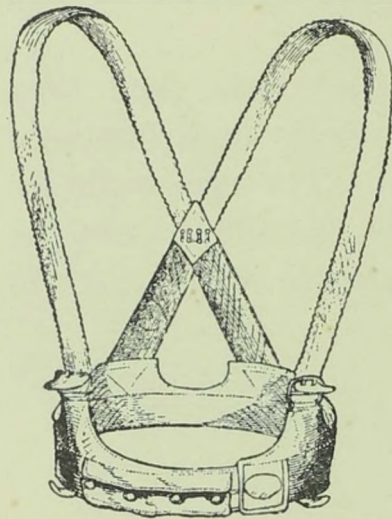
The "patent adjustable bustle" was used to a great extent. It recommended itself "on grounds of health as well as convenience." The size could be "regulated by means of a lace passing across the back." It was made either separate or attached to the skirt, but the "pliability and elasticity" of either kind would permit the whole garment to be "compressed into a small bonnet-box" and yet it would instantly expand on being released from pressure.



AN ADJUSTABLE BUSTLE

Because of the weight of the combined hoops and skirts, it was necessary for the ladies to wear skirt supporters. One type was "a novel and exceedingly useful article, designed to relieve the person from

the burden of the skirt" by means of a "projecting fender", which was "sustained upon the hips by netted pads". This was thought to be a valuable invention from the "hygienic point of view". Another type of skirt supporter was well liked because of its "extreme lightness and simplicity". It consisted of a "girdle of three



A SKIRT SUPPORTER

parallel slips of watch-spring steel, furnished with a slide so as to be readily adapted to the size of the wearer". From this girdle small hooks projected to serve as points of support for the skirts. This girdle, with the skirts, was "sustained by light braces passing over the shoulders."

Sometimes the girdle was equipped with a narrow pouch in front where the young lady might carry valuables, quite secretly indeed.

During the early fifties, the basques and skirts were separate, but later they were fastened together because there was always the trouble of the basque raising up, when the young lady might be dancing with "her young man", or the basque might be too loose for the skirt and droop — for it was very hard for the seamstress to "adapt the under-dress to the fullness of the upper portion of apparel."

To omit the story of the fad of "bloomer dresses" would be to leave out an interesting part of costume evolution in the middle decade of the last century. The so-called Turkish costume was copied by some of the extremists as being a very useful form of dress. This costume had a shortened skirt, with long, full bloomers coming to the ankles. It was thought by some that "health and good taste would "demand a reform," and that common sense would "doubtless second the demand with powerful effect". The "bloomer" costume was the answer to this "demand", but the women who espoused the cause were ridiculed in cartoons as well as in writing.



A BLOOMER COSTUME

A clever parody of Hamlet's soliloquy concluded in favor of long skirts:

To wear or not to wear the Bloomer
 costume, that's the question.
 Whether 'tis nobler in us girls to suffer
 The inconveniences of the long-skirt dress,
 Or cut it off against these muddy troubles,
 And, by the cutting, end them. . . .

Who would the old dress wear,
To groan and toil under the weary load,
But that the dread of something after it —
Of ankles large, of crooked leg, from which
Not all escape, puzzles the will,
And makes us rather wear the dress we have
Than turn out Bloomers.

The long skirts at last won the argument, but not before the bloomers had commanded considerable attention. In cartoons the ladies were characterized as being bold, strong-minded females, while the gentlemen were pictured as modest, effeminate creatures being escorted home by their buxom sweethearts when "Mamma didn't send the carriage". Of course the girls were portrayed making proposals of marriage.

Besides Mrs. Amelia Bloomer, for whom the costume was named, Theodosia Eudoxia Bang was one of the principal advocates. "We are emancipating ourselves," she proclaimed, "among other badges of the slavery of feudalism, from the inconvenient dress of the European female. With man's functions, we have asserted our right to his garb. . . . With this great symbol, we have adopted others, the hat, the cigar, the paletot or round jacket."

Other suffragettes were not of the same opinion, however. On June 6, 1856, Lucy Stone Blackwell was reported to have "repudiated Bloomers and appeared on the Anti-Slavery platform in New York in a long black silk dress fashionably beflounced."

That style of feminine apparel was indeed much more in accord with the mode of the period.

There was a decided tendency toward a great deal of decoration on dresses. All kinds of flowers were used; fringe was fashionable; bows and ribbons of any size and of harmonizing colors were stylish; puffings of net and lace were very good; and even artificial bunches of fruit were used, such as currants, grapes, and small apples. Rûches of ribbon were very popular. In fact anything that might add to the ornamentation of the dress was regarded as stylish and in good taste.

For party dresses, brocades, satin princesse, antique moires, Irish poplins, and heavy chiné silks were in vogue. Even organdi was made into pretty evening dresses. Some of the chinés were called Persian silk because of the Oriental designs. Along toward the last of the decade, striped, checked, and plaid taffeta became popular, though one authority on fashion believed this to be an "eccentricity" of only "two classes of society, the very high or the very low." A "real lady" should always prefer the plain and simple colors and styles with the "absence of everything, in color and ornament, so showy as to offend the purest taste".

A hat would have been a strange item in a lady's costume of that day. They wore bonnets or caps exclusively. The bonnets, made on a whalebone skeleton, or of straw, varied somewhat as to shape at the back but were always quite open at the front



A TYPICAL CLOAK OF 1850



A TYPICAL CLOAK OF 1859

to allow much trimming, usually of flowers and bows. Some were round and low in the back with a



A STRAW BONNET OF 1850

“curtain” or ruffle around the bottom. Others were higher and more flat in the back. Straw bonnets were worn in summer, sometimes as late as November, depending on the severity of the weather. For winter, velvet bonnets were very popular, and if one had some feather trimmings

or marabout — how fashionable! To vary the open-front bonnet, some were dipped in the Mary Stuart fashion.

Simplicity seems to have marked the mode of the promenade coat at the beginning of the decade. The cloak, or “pardessus”, was of medium length, fitted rather closely to the body, and the sleeves were tight enough to keep out the raw December wind. The cloak of the same lady, worn on her afternoon walk ten years later, could not have been the same old jacket rejuvenated and retrimmed. Milady’s cloak of 1859 contained ever so many more yards of

material. It reached nearly to the ground and had doubled in diameter to encompass the enormous hoop skirt of that era. Moreover, the master minds of decoration had evolved an ornate garment with tassels, fringe, embroidery, and silk braid. And it is no wonder that the young ladies of fashion had to wear long gloves, for without them their elbows would surely have been chapped — the sleeves of the cloak were almost as loose and shapeless as a cape.



A VELVET BONNET OF 1856

All dressed while we have been scanning the fashions! One final touch of powder and milady draws her white cashmere wrap about her shoulders. Descending the stairs to the waiting carriage, she complacently takes her place, and as the prancing span swings down the street she feels quite certain that she will look as charming and fashionable as any young lady at the ball.

RAMONA EVANS