

CHAPTER VI.

THE CORSET: ITS HISTORY, USE, AND ABUSE.

“This part of our subject, I regret to say, has not always been wisely treated even by medical writers.”

MRS. WALKER.

“Oh, that my tongue were in the thunder's mouth !
Then with a passion I would shake the world,
And rouse from sleep that fell anatomy
Which cannot hear a feeble lady's voice.”

SHAKSPEARE.



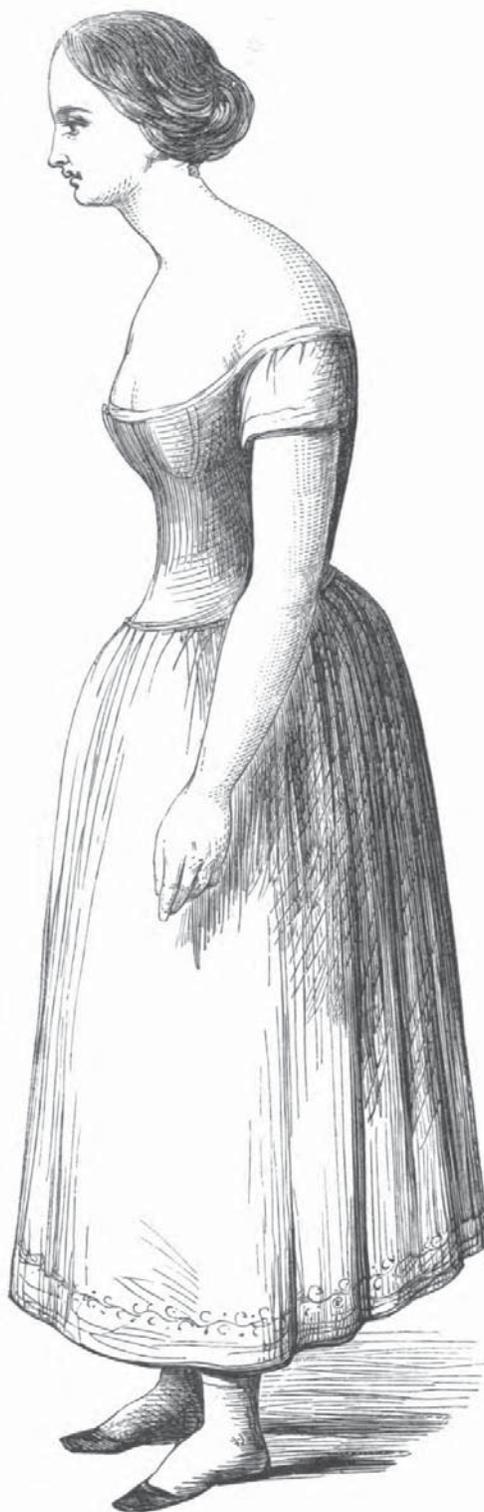
F all articles of human attire there is none, perhaps, that has survived so much abuse as the corset. Introduced into common wear many centuries ago, it was met with the rebuke of the sober and the satire of the vivacious ; always painful, and generally injurious, it has, nevertheless, outlived even the general condemnation of the faculty, and spite even of the doctor maintains its ground. There must surely be some fascination in the article, or some latent conviction that, after all, it is a good

FIG. 2.



The same figure restored to its natural position by the Hygienic Corset, scientifically adapted to the body.

FIG. 1.



The stooping figure, induced by the ordinary ill-constructed Corset pressing on the sternum.

thing, or it would have been banished out of the world long ago.

Now, we hope to reverse the dictum of Mr. Whitfield and other medical men, who contend that stays and corsets are bad things, and in the course of this chapter show that, properly constructed, corsets are, as articles of dress, the most useful and in every sense the most beneficial that can be constructed—that is, of course, when they are properly adapted to the body; for if, either through ignorance or a mistaken idea of fashion, the construction be faulty, and a compression of the chest ensue, why, then, undoubtedly it is far better to be without them altogether.

It is a matter of little consequence for us to inquire here why the female figure needs support more than that of the male. In a purely natural, or rather savage state, perhaps it does not; but in all times when beauty and comfort are studied, corsets will undoubtedly be worn, and there are many reasons why they should be. The delicacy of the intercostal muscles, the falling of the breasts, the spreading of the frame at a certain period of life, all call for support, and call for it too in a manner that must be attended to. And to what purpose are the resources of art, if they are not to supply the

deficiencies imposed on Nature in consequence of our artificial state of living? Perfection in the human body is ideal, or rarely met with; and what the artist in dress has to do is to soften the natural excrescences, and give grace and beauty to the homely or imperfect, that they may approximate nearer to that which they ought to be. In a few rare instances this may be done without corsets, but in ninety-nine cases out of every hundred the well-adapted corset is indispensable.

It is hardly possible to say at what particular period stays or corsets were first worn. TIGHT LACING is condemned by writers soon after the Conquest—indeed, in the reign of William Rufus; but it does not follow that stays were necessarily worn at that time, and an inspection of a great number of ancient paintings and illuminations induces us to believe that they were not. In Strutt's "Antiquities," Plate XXXIV., there is a beautiful sketch of Queen Matilda, A.D. 1100, who is wearing an elegant and naturally-fitting dress close to the body; and that this fashion continued for a long time may be seen from a figure given in Shaw's "Dresses of the Middle Ages"—that of Margaret, wife of St. Louis, King of France, A.D. 1234.

A glance at those figures will show at once that

it is possible to compress the waist by lacing the dress too tight, as well as with stays. And it is possible—indeed to our mind certain—that corsets, such as those in present use, were not known at this



MARGARET, WIFE OF LOUIS, KING OF FRANCE, A.D. 1234.

period. A pious monk, however, has recorded two important facts relative to those dresses; the one is, that a fine lady in the habit of wearing them died, and as she had lived an ordinary life, her sins

and merits fairly balanced in the scales of justice, until her clothes were thrown in, and then the fatal scale sunk loaded with her follies. The other lady meets her reward earlier, for a great knight who was famous all over Europe having obtained papa's consent, came for the purpose of marrying her, and finding her very tight-laced and unnaturally small in the waist, fell in love with her younger sister, who dressed in a more natural manner; and the lady, like many others, died a maid, the victim of her own vanity.

Still it is evident that a corset, or perhaps more properly speaking, a "cincture" has been worn by women in one form or another in almost every civilized community. The necessity for supporting the figure and breasts in domestic duties; in maternal cares, and in dancing; and also to enable the folds of a flowing robe to fall gracefully over the bosom, led no doubt to the invention of this ornament, which is at once useful and agreeable to the wearer.

The ancients had accordingly several sorts of cinctures. One used solely to preserve the spherical form of the breasts was called by the Greeks *taduidion*, and by the Romans *strophium*. Ovid furnishes ladies with rules for the use of this band, and it

seems to have been in general use. The other cincture, called the *hiria zona*, and sometimes *mitra*, was intended to encircle the figure and fasten the waving folds of the drapery. These articles may be observed on several of the ancient statues of Asia.

Stiff stays with busks are an undoubted product of the middle ages, although the precise period of their introduction is uncertain. Singularly enough Satan is the first figure that we have seen in which the use of the article is undoubted. In an illuminated MS., made soon after the Conquest, there is a representation of Christ's Temptation, in which the artist has satirically dressed his Infernal Majesty in the full costume of a lady of the period. His waist is most charmingly slender, and its shape admirably preserved by tight lacing from the waist upwards, the ornamental tag depending from the last hole of the bodice. But the first real figure that we have met with, in which the corset may be fairly detected, is that of Constance, Queen of Castle, who, in 1372, married John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster. From this it would appear that the custom of wearing them is of foreign, and not native origin; and this impression will be further confirmed by a study of the pure English dresses of the period. Almost a century after this, the Duchess

of Gloucester may be seen (See Strutt, Plate XLIV.) dressed in an elegant and natural manner without corsets. When, however, they were once adopted, it was only natural, following other fashions, that they should run into extremes ; and hence the waist was not only compressed and rendered unnaturally small, but rose and fell with the caprice of the times. At one time close up to the breasts, and at another down to the hips, it ascended and descended with the whim of the age ; but the corset, for good or ill, always held its ground. The fardingale came in and went out, with a thousand other fashions, but the corset remains ; and we doubt not but it will, when properly adapted to the body, remain as long as there are sensible ladies left in the world to wear it.

We should like, above all things, to possess a museum of old stays, beginning with the first rude effort of the savage to support the body, and passing on from the bodices of the middle ages down to those of our own time—the good, bad, and indifferent of all ages. Dr. Johnson defines stays, “*bodice*, a kind of stiff waistcoat, made of whalebone, worn by women ;” but there were stays worn in England long before there was any whalebone to make them with, and they were consequently made, as they

ever have been since, of different materials. The older corsets were generally made of canvas, duck, or jean, and were stiffened either with straw, cord, or what were then called "stay-sticks," that is, pieces of wood which were used for the same purpose as whalebone and steel busks are now. Occasionally, however, leather, such as that worn for soles of shoes, was used, and formed a heavy casing for the body. Indeed, this was the case whatever material was adopted; the corset was a stiff, heavy, and unyielding envelope in which the body was confined, wanting alike in adaptation and elasticity.

There is something supremely ridiculous, to us, in the old sumptuary laws, which regulated the dress of every class of the community, the gravity with which the Legislature fixes the width of a lappet or the dimensions of a ruff, and determines that no gallant shall walk the streets with the toes of his shoes more than half a yard long; but we are not aware that those sages ever dealt with the corset; what they, however, omitted, the medical faculty took up, and a controversy almost as edifying has been carried on between the doctors and the stay-makers, each party being perfectly ignorant of the other's profession. A lady believes what she *feels*,

and hence, practically, the staymakers triumphed, for the corset was still worn; but the facts upon which the medical man based his reasoning remained unanswered, for the other party, knowing nothing of physiology, made the stays with as little relation to the requirements of the body as before. This controversy, however, made one thing plain enough—the old corset could be tolerated no longer, and people began to look for something better. An attempt was made to meet this demand by machine woven and other kinds, called by the most strange and unintelligible names; but as they had all the disadvantages of the old corset, and were only better to look at, it was plain that they could not be the desideratum; neither was it possible that they ever should be, for the people who designed them were ignorant of the first principles upon which they should have proceeded, and not knowing what the body required, could not, as a matter of course, adapt their productions to its necessities. Hence, however elegantly shaped or finely stitched they might be, they utterly failed in the object which they should have served. In this case the body was forced into the shape of the corset, instead of the corset being fitted to the shape of the body; there was, consequently, an infringement of the laws

of Nature, and we all know that no one can violate her canon with impunity.

The true object of corsets ought to be to support the bones as they increase in size and weight, without obstructing the due development of the muscles by which they are moved. The artist in corsets will therefore anticipate every requirement through life, and adapt her contrivances to the ever-varying wants of the body.

Against tight lacing we, in common with all who have paid attention to the subject, earnestly protest. By a perseverance in this habit the health is injured and the symmetry of the figure entirely destroyed. The stays in ordinary use are ill constructed, and cannot be effectual in the promotion of the objects for which they are professedly designed, whether tightly laced or not. Let us suppose a young lady who has been in the habit of stooping, suddenly made aware of the injury to her general health occasioned by this practice, going to one of the numerous staymakers with which London abounds, in hopes that she may be able to purchase what will restore her to the erect position. Most of our readers are aware that this will be attempted by a strong steel, whalebone, or wooden busk passed down the front of the corset; that the stays will

be strengthened by an immense number of springs and bones, placed without the least regard to the anatomical construction of the body; and that, moreover, *in order to give the necessary power of motion to the figure, pieces of elastic are fitted in at the back.* Now, by this arrangement, the lady who subjects herself to this machine may for a few days be kept erect by the pressure of the busk. As for grace or comfort, that is totally out of the question, as the busk presses too much upon the chest and abdomen to permit ease to be for one moment a matter of consideration, and in the course of a very short time the busk becomes the whole medium of support; it bends under the weight, and by its inward curvature presses on the very portion of the body whose free action is essential to health. In this case the stays only aggravate the evil; for, if she must stoop, it is better that she should do so without the corset than with it. In the former case, there is only the weight of the body pressing upon itself, in the latter the busk acts as a lever to increase the pressure upon the oppressed organs.

Any person who has the curiosity to examine the figure of a lady who is in the habit of wearing stays that are ill constructed, will observe that at the back the bones with which they are filled stand promi-

nently out, presenting a very unsightly appearance. The shoulder-straps, which in our corsets are totally unnecessary, fall over the arm, pinioning it to the side ; the head pokes forward ; the body is bent ; and the upper and lower extremities of the busk protrude, being visible even underneath the dress. The elastic at the back prevents any support being afforded to that important region, and the spine is still inclined to bend as before.

The first thing that occurred to us in the construction of our corset was, that, to secure the full and healthy development of the bosom, the prominent parts of the body should support the weaker, and the vital organs be subjected to no more pressure than was consistent with their free and healthy action. The muscles of the back require an increase of strength, so as to draw back the shoulders, and thus enlarge the capacity of the chest. How to do this without the use of shoulder-straps became the problem to solve, and by a careful study of the origin and insertion of the muscles of the back and loins, together with the mode in which their fibres contracted, we at length found the precise point where traction could be made, so as to keep the body erect and the shoulders down, without in any way interfering with the natural action of the chest

and abdomen. We will prove this to any one who allow us to place our hands on their back for a few seconds. However much they may stoop, we will put them immediately in the erect position, and at the same time occasion a feeling of the greatest relief.

The information thus obtained gave rise to the formation of the *Hygienic Corset*, which has from time to time been improved upon, until it is brought to a state of absolute perfection. The experience of years, and the reports of the scientific world, speak louder in its praise than it would become us to do, and we content ourselves with saying that they are made either plain, for ordinary use; with elastic fronts for ladies practising singing, or those of delicate constitution; or for supporting ladies who have a tendency to corpulency—improving the figure and affording ease and comfort in every period and condition of life.

In all our corsets and adaptations we employ different kinds of fastenings according to the requirements of the case. It is sometimes asked why, in those which fasten in front, we employ a counter-lacing at the back. Now, the mode in which corsets are laced is a matter of the highest importance, as may be explained in a few words. The back is sup-

ported by means of two levers which run along the corset in parallel lines to the spine, and in the usual mode of lacing the corset, the tops of these levers are brought closely together, by which means the lower extremities are widely separated. As the lacing proceeds, the neck is forced violently down, the ribs contracted, a great pressure is exerted on the abdomen, and when the painful operation is at length completed, a distance of several inches is left between the lower points of the levers, this deficiency occurring at the very point at which support was needed.

Hitherto we have only spoken of the corset, and have avoided any allusion to the other articles of dress, which in many cases are equally faulty in their construction. Many ladies will say, and say truly, that they never lace tightly, but who, at the same time, make the dress so tight as to completely crush in the stays, and, in pressing the unyielding bodice of the dress upon the folded underclothing, produce more evil than a tight corset would. It becomes, therefore, a matter of some importance to arrange the whole of the underclothing upon such principles as shall give all the warmth and comfort necessary, and at the same time allow the natural and healthy action of every organ, whilst it displays

the full beauty of the human form. We have for this purpose constructed a petticoat suspender which will be found to answer every purpose that can be desired.

A glance at the illustration below will give a good idea of the manner in which this purpose is accomplished. All the petticoats are united in one band, by which means an equal distribution of the whole weight and fulness of the clothing is obtained, and the point of support being properly taken, the pressure is removed from the yielding portion of the body and thrown upon that which is able to bear it. The effect of this distribution of the clothing is shown in the accompanying figure, which, with the underclothing properly adjusted, displays all the grace and beauty of the form, and indicates the ease and comfort of the wearer.

The Petticoat Suspender is a simple band of jean, cotille, or any other material that may be preferred, fastened to and forming a part of the corset. It has three rows of buttons, to which the petticoats are buttoned on. By this simple contrivance the weight of the clothing is not only thrown upon the parts that should support it, but, by removing the strings from the waist, it has a more slender appearance; and the petticoats, being properly suspended

and thrown off the hips, there is no need for dress improvers, crinoline, or hoops, for the purpose of displaying the lower part of the dress.



PETTICOAT SUSPENDER.

The full advantage of the Petticoat Suspender can only be appreciated by a minute inspection of the article, and a clear conception of its uses. When this is done, it will be seen that the two objects which we ever keep in view—utility and elegance—are fully realized. See how nicely the full *contour* of the figure is displayed; the beauty of all the

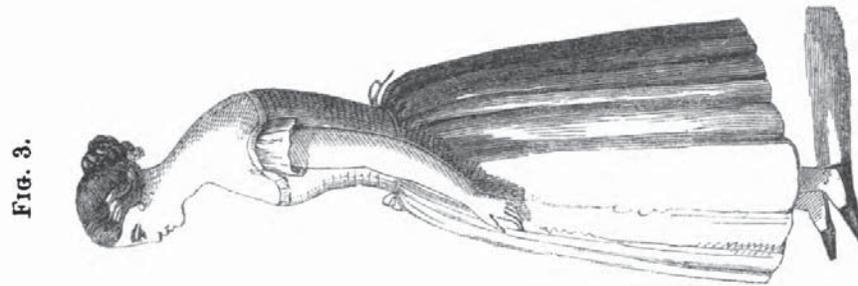


FIG. 3.

Stooping induced by drooping of the head, commonly called "poking of the head."

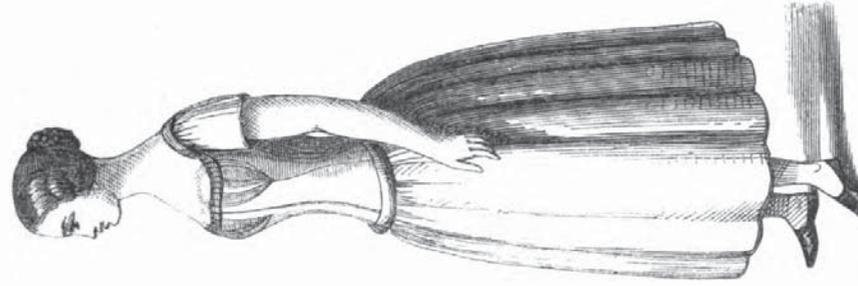


FIG. 4.

The same figure restored by giving support to the back and shoulders, and balancing the weight of the upper part of the body.

undulating lines which throw an indescribable charm over the figure of Venus are here preserved. The motions are easy, the breathing natural, the carriage graceful ; and as

“The rose, besides its beauty, is a cure,”

so the clothing here answers the double purpose of displaying the figure and preserving the health. We have in the course of a long and successful career invented many things. Our steel spring for the cap has been adopted by every civilized nation in the world ; the hook at the bottom of the corset has met with a similar reception ; and as for our Hygienic Corset, it is either pirated or attempted by almost every staymaker in London or Paris ; and our band will share the same fate. Before this was written we kept the secret pretty well, and only allowed a few of our friends to possess it ; but within six months after this is published it will be displayed and advertised in all directions, cut and twisted into every shape to make it look unlike ours ; and we should not be surprised if some genius or other should turn it upside down, just to display her originality. Well, so be it ; the only thing that we desire is, that those who use it will use it properly, and have the good taste and honesty to award the

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credit of the invention to the parties to whom it is due.

We cannot better conclude this chapter than in the words of Mrs. Walker. In her admirable work on "Female Beauty," she says, "Every young woman knows that one of the most conspicuous differences between the young and the old consists in the less or the greater dimensions of the waist. Is it, then, unaccountable or unnatural that she should prefer seeming young to seeming old? Every young woman knows that one of the most conspicuous differences between the maiden and the matron consists in the same less or greater dimensions of the waist. Is it unnatural, then, that she should prefer seeming maidenly to seeming matronly? Men who write so ignorantly or injudiciously, as many medical authors do, do not promote the interest of truth. It is the use of force and excessive compression that are alone blameable."