

"Creations," Not Hats, In 1910!

What the Well-dressed Woman Was Wearing When the King Came to the Throne



Believe it or not, but these hats were the last word in fashion in 1910! They are taken from a 25-year-old catalogue—published the year his Majesty came to the throne. The hat on the left—or “creation,” as they were called in those days—is described as “in Manilla straw, with medium-sized brim. Black velvet trimmed with moiré ribbon and pink roses—39/6.” The one in the centre is “in leather with stitched brim and buckle of leather. Cerise, emerald and all shades—25/9.” On the right is “a maid’s hat in shot silk. White and black Valenciennes lace on brim. Lined with Leghorn—3½ guineas.”

WHEN the King came to the throne in 1910, I wasn’t interested in women or their fashions. In fact, by dint of a little rapid calculation on my fingers and toes, I discover that I wasn’t interested in anything, being just a possibility that was causing whispers about among parents’ friends. However, with the King’s Jubilee upon us, and my own Silver Jubilee not so far off, I’m taking a more lively interest in the world about me.

What was New Zealand like in May, 1910? The question is being asked in many homes this week, but those of us who have nothing but a few inconsequential memories of childhood to fall back on, are likely to be particularly vague about it. I discovered one approach to the everyday life of 25 years ago in the 1910 catalogue of a big New Zealand general store. Among its 250 pages I found much to delight and bewilder me—but one subject was irresistible—hats.

They were, in the best sense of the word, “creations,” these hats. Not just flashes of inspiration embodied in two curves and an angle such as make the 1935 husband wonder what he is paying for. They were planned with perspectives, evolved, built up, erected, consolidated patiently, tier upon tier.

Questing rosebuds climb spirally about their bases to be engulfed in voluptuous cascades of ostrich plumes. Great peonies peep out coyly from the voluminous folds of satin, mosque-like domes of straw float on foamy seas of tulle, and starry veils sweep down from their

altitudes to caress the white curves of their wearers’ throats.

Eighteen-inch crowns ride regally over glories of long, subtly-coiled tresses, and the widest of the brims cannot be much less than 3ft. in diameter, and solid-looking at that. Even the “sensible”—sporting and motoring—millinery shares the prevailing exuberance, with great bows and buckles and pheasant wings. Surely never in the history of fashion have hats been more enormous, more elaborate.

This is the startling, the picturesque revelation of 1910. Other pages of the catalogue are equally entertaining. Who would have thought that, just 25 years ago, saddlery and harness could command 20 pages all to themselves, with oil lamps occupying 12 pages of the catalogue?

Gentlemen’s scarf-pins were evidently very popular. So were gold and silver cab-whistles. Gramophones, horned and hornless, command only one page, but there is a large section devoted to sheet-music for pianoforte. Curious obsolete devices—hair frames, pads, frisettes, moustache trainers—stimulate the imagination or the memory, according to one’s age.

But the real, the inevitable nostalgia does not arise until one reads the wine list. Grand Highland Liqueur Whisky 20 years old for 5/6 a bottle, Heidsieck Dry Monopole at 90/- a dozen, and 1884 vintage port at only 100/-. A good claret could be had for half-a-crown, a reasonable burgundy for 3/-, and 1865 brandy at 11/-. Perhaps they were “good old days” after all!