

WHAT MAKES QUALITY?

Points To Remember About Tweeds

(From Our London Correspondent.)

THE other day I had a letter from a reader abroad that went straight to my heart. "I want to buy a camel coat," she wrote, "but I've no idea what to pay to get a decent one. They seem to vary in price so tremendously. What is the difference, if any?"

Now, I have an inquiring mind myself, and always like to know what I am getting for my money. Two tweed suits may look very much the same at first sight, but wear them half a dozen times, be out in the rain or send them to the cleaners, and you'll soon discover why one costs a couple of pounds more than the other. The same thing with two apparently similar sweaters. One will come up as downy and good as new after each washing; the other will go hard, or thin, or the colour will run so that it's a mere travesty of its original self. Trouble is, of course, that in these days of extravagant descriptions it's sometimes difficult, without a little technical knowledge, to understand what makes quality, and therefore where the value lies.

Pondering on all this, I went off to some textile experts. I've had a pretty good training myself, but because this question of "what we get for what we pay" really matters to all intelligent women, I determined to take no chances!

My first question was about that camel coat, and here are the hard facts.

All the camel hair (or fleece) is not of the same quality. There's as much difference between the soft, fine under-hairs and the coarse outer ones as between down

Himalayas, and that his coat has to come to us thousands of miles, by primitive caravans, across Tibet and China?

That little bit of geographical information explains why cashmere is so wondrously warm (the Himalayas are about the coldest place where fleece-bearing animals live) and why real cashmere can never be cheap.

It All Depends

As with camel, all the fleece is by no means of the same quality. Again, the soft, downy hair next the skin differs vastly from the coarser outer hairs. Apart, too, from the difference in the raw material, much depends on the methods of manufacture. Makers of the best cashmere sweaters twist their yarns well in the spinning to give them strength. A yarn with little twist on it will feel soft but won't wear in nearly the same way, for there won't be so much cashmere in it. Then much depends on knitting, too. A well-twisted elastic yarn will knit up much more smoothly, and give a more even appearance. Those of you who knit yourselves will appreciate this. Then there's the gauge of the needles. If you use a fine wool on big needles, you get a much more open garment. For summer, for instance, this may be wanted, but a maker who wants to produce a cheaper article will do this and then brush up the sweater after knitting so that it looks beautifully soft and fluffy and equal to a thicker, better one. When it comes to washing, though, all this fluff comes away and you're left with a garment on its way to becoming threadbare. Look inside a sweater to see if it has been brushed up there. If so, suspect it as not being the best quality! Makers of the highest grades use only a soft brush on the outside; those who attempt to make a less good article look better tease it up inside and out.

Plain styles in cashmere sweaters and cardigans cost less than those in fancy knits. The reason? The more elaborate machines used for the latter have to run slower and so produce less. Colour also may put up price. You only get the lovely high-style colours in the more expensive makes, for though there will be only a limited call for these, the trouble and cost of "dyeing up" specially remains unchanged.

Pure cashmere, by the way, doesn't shrink, or not appreciably, so long as washed carefully. That makes it last for ages, so in the long run, once again the best becomes the cheapest.

Tweeds need a whole article in themselves, they're so much in the fashion picture. Funnily enough, or perhaps naturally, though the world's finest tweeds are produced in the British Isles, we know less about them, and value them less, than they do overseas. In America, for instance, they'll take as much pride in the material as in the name of the model house that makes it up. It seems a pity we're not as appreciative here, for if there's one thing in which quality pays handsomely, and shows quite unmistakably, it's in tweeds, and indeed all woollens.

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Sheep Of The Border

Did you know that the best tweeds are still made from native British wool? Sheep vary tremendously in the type of fleece they produce, and though for worsteds and the fine "drapey" sheer woollens that are so much in the fashion picture the finest Empire wool is best, it's the sturdy little mountain sheep of the Western Isles, the Scottish border country, Cumberland and Westmorland, that give us most of the finest tweed wool.

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and feathers. The downy hair keeps the animal warm, and obviously it performs the same service for us! This under-hair makes the most beautiful, supple cloth, extremely light and warm, with a lovely velvety "handle" and superb tailoring qualities. Once upon a time, this was the only camel hair used, but when the demand for camel coats increased, manufacturers looked round for something cheaper and started using the coarse, dark outer-hairs. The cloth made from them, though still "camel," is heavier, less warm, darker in appearance, sometimes has long, coarse hairs showing, and doesn't have the same rich "feel." So you see, the difference is quite big. Look for a light-weight, light-coloured cloth, very soft and velvety, and you'll be getting quality.

Camel coats, by the way, seem to be getting much more adventurous in cut and style. A year or so ago, we could only get classic topcoats, but now, as well as reefer and swing-back shapes, you can see the grandest little capes (perfect for travelling), camel skirts that positively don't sit out, and even camel blouses.

Almost as much abused a term as "camel" is that of "cashmere." You know what a camel looks like, but did you know that cashmere fleece comes from a mountain goat that lives way up in the Indian