

***WILLIAM
BARRY LORD***



***THE CORSET AND
THE CRINOLINE***

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William Barry Lord

The Corset and the Crinoline

**A Book of Modes and Costumes from Remote Periods
to the Present Time**

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PREFACE.

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The subject which we have here treated is a sort of figurative battle-field, where fierce contests have for ages been from time to time waged; and, notwithstanding the determined assaults of the attacking hosts, the contention and its cause remain pretty much as they were at the commencement of the war. We in the matter remain strictly neutral, merely performing the part of the public's "own correspondent," making it our duty to gather together such extracts from despatches, both ancient and modern, as may prove interesting or important, to take note of the vicissitudes of war, mark its various phases, and, in fine, to do our best to lay clearly before our readers the historical facts—experiences and arguments—relating to the much-discussed "*Corset question*."

As most of our readers are aware, the leading journals especially intended for the perusal of ladies have been for many years the media for the exchange of a vast number of letters and papers touching the use of the Corset. The questions relating to the history of this apparently indispensable article of ladies' attire, its construction, application, and influence on the figure have become so numerous of late that we have thought, by embodying all that we can glean and garner relating to Corsets, their wearers, and the various costumes worn by ladies at different periods, arranging the subject-matter in its due order as to dates, and at the same time availing ourselves

of careful illustration when needed, that an interesting volume would result.

No one, we apprehend, would be likely to deny that, to enable the fairer portion of the civilised human race to follow the time-honoured custom of presenting to the eye the waist in its most slender proportions, the Corset in some form must be had recourse to. Our information will show how ancient and almost universal its use has been, and there is no reason to anticipate that its aid will ever be dispensed with so long as an elegant and attractive figure is an object worth achieving.

Such being the case, it becomes a matter of considerable importance to discover by what means the desirable end can be acquired without injury to the health of those whose forms are being restrained and moulded into proportions generally accepted as graceful, by the use and influence of the Corset. It will be our duty to lay before the reader the strictures of authors, ancient and modern, on this article of dress, and it will be seen that the animadversions of former writers greatly exceed modern censures, both in number and fierceness of condemnation. This difference probably arises from the fact of Corsets of the most unyielding and stubborn character being universally made use of at the time the severest attacks were made upon them; and there can be no reasonable doubt that much which was written in their condemnation had some truth in it, although accompanied by a vast deal of fanciful exaggeration. It would also be not stating the whole of the case if we omitted here to note that modern authors, who launch sweeping anathemas on the very stays by the aid of which

their wives and daughters are made presentable in society, almost invariably quote largely from scribes of ancient date, and say little or nothing, of their own knowledge. On the other hand, it will be seen that those writing in praise of the moderate use of Corsets take their facts, experiences, and grounds of argument from the every-day life and general custom of the present period.

The Crinoline is too closely associated with the Corset and with the mutable modes affected by ladies, from season to season, to be omitted from any volume which treats of Fashion. The same facts, indeed, may be stated of both the Crinoline and the Corset. Both appear to be equally indispensable to the woman of the present period. To make them serve the purposes of increased cleanliness, comfort, and grace, not only without injury to the health, but with positive and admitted advantage to the *physique*—these are the problems to be solved by those whose business it is to minister to the ever-changing taste and fashion of the day.



THE CORSET AND THE CRINOLINE.

CHAPTER I.

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The origin of the Corset—The Indian hunting-belt—Reduction of the figure by the ancient inhabitants of Polenqui—Use of the Corset by the natives of the Eastern Archipelago—Improvements in construction brought about by the advance of civilisation—Slenderness of waist esteemed a great beauty in the East—Earth-eating in Java—Figure-training in Ceylon—The beauties of Circassia, their slender waists and Corsets—Elegant princesses of Crim Tartary—Hindoo belles—Hindoo ideas of beauty—Elegance of figure highly esteemed by the Persians—Letter from a Chinese gentleman (Woo-tan-zhin) on slender waists—Researches amongst the antiquities of Egypt—Fashions of the Egyptian ladies—The Corset in use among the Israelitish ladies—The elegance of their costume, bridal dress, &c.—Scriptural references.

FOR the origin of the corset we must travel back into far antiquity. How far it would be difficult to determine. The unreclaimed savage who, bow in hand, threads the mazes of the primeval forests in pursuit of the game he subsists on, fashions for himself, from the skin of some animal which good fortune may have cast in his way, a belt or girdle from which to suspend his rude knife, quiver, or other hunting gear; and experience teaches him that, to answer the purpose efficiently, it should be moderately broad and sufficiently stiff to prevent creasing when secured round the

waist. A sharpened bone, or fire-hardened stick, serves to make a row of small holes at each end; a strip of tendon, or a thong of hide, forms a lace with which the extremities are drawn together, thereby giving support to the figure during the fatigues of the chase. The porcupine's quill, the sea-shell, the wild beast's tooth, and the cunningly-dyed root, all help to decorate and ornament the hunting-belt. The well-formed youths and graceful belles of the tribe were not slow in discovering that, when arrayed in all the panoply of forest finery, a belt well drawn in, as shown in the annexed illustration, served to display the figure to much greater advantage than one carelessly or loosely adjusted. Here, then, we find the first indication of the use of the corset as an article of becoming attire. At the very first dawn of civilisation there are distinct evidences of the use of contrivances for the reduction and formation of the female figure. Researches among the ruins of Polenqui, one of the mysterious forest cities of South America, whose history is lost in remote antiquity, have brought to light most singular evidences of the existence of a now forgotten race. Amongst the works of art discovered there is a bas-relief representing a female figure, which, in addition to a profusion of massive ornaments, wears a complicated and elaborate waist-bandage, which, by a system of circular and transverse folding and looping, confines the waist from just below the ribs to the hips as firmly and compactly as the most unyielding corset of the present day.

At the period of the discovery of some of the islands of the Eastern Archipelago, it was found customary for all young females to wear a peculiar kind of corset, formed of

spirally-arranged rattan cane, and this, when once put on, was not removed until the celebration of the marriage ceremony. Such races as were slowly advancing in the march of civilisation, after discovery by the early navigators, became more and more accustomed to the use of clothing, to adjust and retain which, waistbands would become essentially requisite. These, when made sufficiently broad to fit without undue friction, and stiff enough to prevent folding together in the act of stooping, sitting, or moving about, at once became in effect corsets, and suggested to the minds of the ingenious a system of cutting and fitting so as more perfectly to adapt them to the figure of the wearer. The modes of fastening, as we shall see, have been various, from the simple sewing together with the lace to the costly buckle and jewelled loop and stud.



THE DAWN OF THE CORSET.

Investigation proves to us that the taste for slender waists prevailed even more in the Eastern nations than in those of Europe, and we find that other means besides that of compression have been extensively taken advantage of. Humboldt, in his personal narrative, describes the women of Java, and informs us that the reddish clay called "*ampo*" is eaten by them in order that they may become

slim, want of plumpness being a kind of beauty in that country. Though the use of this earth is fatal to health, those desirous of profiting by its reducing qualities persevere in its consumption. Loss of appetite and inability to partake of more than most minute portions of food are not slow in bringing the wished-for consummation about. The inhabitants of Ceylon make a perfect study of the training of the figure to the most slender proportions. Books on the subject are common in that country, and no young lady is considered the perfection of fashionable elegance unless a great number of qualities and graces are possessed; not the least of these is a waist which can be quite or nearly clasped with the two hands; and, as we proceed with our work, it will be seen that this standard for the perfection of waist-measurement has been almost world-wide. From the coral-fringed and palm-decked islands of the Pacific and Indian Ocean we have but to travel to the grass-clad Yaila of Crim Tartary and the rock-crowned fastnesses of Circassia, to see the same tastes prevailing, and even more potent means in force for the obtainment of a taper form. Any remarks from us as to the beauty of the ladies of Circassia would be needless, their claim to that enviable endowment being too well established to call for confirmation at our hands, and that no pains are spared in the formation of their figures will be best seen by a

quotation from a recent traveller who writes on the subject:—

"What would" (he says) "our ladies think of this fashion on the part of the far-famed beauties of Circassia? The women wear a corset made of 'morocco,' and furnished with two plates of wood placed on the chest, which, by their strong pressure, prevent the expansion of the chest; this corset also confines the bust from the collar-bones to the waist by means of a cord which passes through leather rings. They even wear it during the night, and only take it off when worn out, to put on another quite as small." He then speaks of the daughters of Osman Oglow, and says, "Their figures were tightened in an extraordinary degree, and their *arteries* were clasped from the throat downwards by silver plates."

These plates are not only ornamental, but being firmly sewn to the two busks in front of the corset, and being longest at the top and narrowest at the waist, when clasped, as shown in the accompanying illustration, any change in fit or adjustment is rendered impossible. It will be seen on examination that at each side of the bottom of the corsage is a large round plate or boss of ornamental silver. These serve as clasps for the handsomely-mounted silver waist-belt, and by their size and position serve to contrast with the waist, and make it appear extremely small. That the elegancies of female attire have been deeply studied even among the Tartars of the Crimea will be seen by the following account, written by Madame de Hell, of her visit to Princess Adel Beg, a celebrated Tartar beauty:—

"Admitted into a fairy apartment looking out on a terraced garden, a curtain was suddenly raised at the end of the room, and a woman of striking beauty entered, dressed in rich costume. She advanced to me with an air of remarkable dignity, took both my hands, kissed me on the two cheeks, and sat down beside me, making many demonstrations of friendship. She wore a great deal of rouge; her eyelids were painted black, and met over the nose, giving her countenance a certain sternness, which, nevertheless, did not destroy its pleasing effect. A furred velvet vest fitted tight to her still elegant figure, and altogether her appearance surpassed what I had conceived of her beauty. After some time, when I offered to go, she checked me with a very graceful gesture, and said eagerly, 'Pastoi, pastoi,' which is Russian for 'Stay, stay,' and clapped her hands several times. A young girl entered at the signal, and by her mistress's orders threw open a folding-door, and immediately I was struck dumb with surprise and admiration by a most brilliant apparition. Imagine, reader, the most exquisite sultanas of whom poetry and painting have ever tried to convey an idea, and still your conception will fall far short of the enchanting models I had then before me. There were three of them, all equally graceful and beautiful. They were clad in tunics of crimson brocade, adorned in front with broad gold lace. The tunics were open, and disclosed beneath them cashmere robes with very tight sleeves, terminating in gold fringes. The youngest wore a tunic of azure-blue brocade, with silver ornaments; this was the only difference between her dress and that of her sisters. All three had magnificent black hair escaping in countless

tresses from a fez of silver filigree, set like a diadem over their ivory foreheads. They wore gold-embroidered slippers and wide trousers drawn close at the ankle. I had never beheld skins so dazzlingly fair, eyelashes so long, or so delicate a bloom of youth."



CIRCISSIAN LADY.



EGYPTIAN LADY IN FULL SKIRT.

The Hindoos subject the figures of their dancing-girls and future belles to a system of very careful training; in all their statues, from those of remote antiquity, to be seen in the great cave temples of Carlee Elanra, and Elephanta, to those of comparatively modern date, the long and slender waist is invariably associated with other attributes

of their standard of beauty. "Thurida," the daughter of Brahma, is thus described by a Hindoo writer:—

"This girl" (he informs us) "was of a yellow colour, and had a nose like the flower of resamum; her legs were taper, like the plantain tree; her eyes large, like the principal leaf of the lotus; her eyebrows extended to her ears; her lips were red, and like the young leaves of the mango tree; her face was like the full moon; her voice like the sound of the cuckoo; her arms reached to her knees; her throat was like that of a pigeon; her loins narrow, like those of a lion; her hair hung in curls down to her feet; her teeth were like the seeds of the pomegranate; and walk like that of a drunken elephant or a goose."

The Persians entertain much the same notions with regard to the necessity for slenderness of form in the belles of their nation, but differ in other matters from the Hindoos. The following illustration represents a dancing-girl of Persia, and it will be seen that her figure bears no indication of neglect of cultivation. It is somewhat curious that the Chinese, with all their extraordinary ingenuity, have confined their restrictive efforts to the feet of the ladies, leaving their waists unconfined. That their doing so is more the result of long-established custom than absence of admiration for elegantly-proportioned figures will be clearly proved by the following extract from a letter published in *Chambers' Journal*, written by a genuine inhabitant of the Celestial Empire, named Woo-tan-zhin, who paid a visit to England in 1844-45. Thus he describes the ladies of England:—

"Their eyes, having the blue tint of the waters of autumn, are charming beyond description, and their waists are laced as tight and thin as a willow branch. What, perhaps, caught my fancy most was the sight of elegantly-dressed young ladies, with pearl-like necks and tight-laced waists; nothing can possibly be so enchanting as to see ladies that compress themselves into taper forms of the most exquisite shape, the like of which I have never seen before."

By many writers it has been urged that the admiration so generally felt for slenderly-proportioned and taper waists results from an artificial taste set up by long custom; but in Woo-tan-zhin's case it was clearly not so, as the small-waisted young ladies of the "outer barbarians" were to him much as some new and undescribed flowers or birds would be to the wondering naturalist who first beheld them.

Although researches among the antiquities of Egypt and Thebes fail to bring to our notice an article of dress corresponding with the waist-bandage of Polenqui or the strophium of later times, we find elaborately-ornamented waistbelts in general use, and by their arrangement it will be seen that they were so worn as to show the waist off to the best advantage. The accompanying illustrations represent Egyptian ladies of distinction. The dress in the first, it will be observed, is worn long. A sort of transparent mantle covers and gives an appearance of width to the shoulders, whilst a coloured sash, after binding the waist, is knotted in front, and the ends allowed to fall freely over the front of the dress, much as we have seen it worn in our own time; and it is most remarkable that, although there is no evidence to show the use of crinoline by the ladies of old

Egypt, the lower border of the skirt, in some instances, appears distended as in the prior illustration; whilst in others, as shown in the second engraving, the dress is made to fit the lower portion of the figure closely, barely affording scope for the movement of the legs in walking. How often these arrangements of dress have been in turn adopted and discarded will be seen as our work proceeds.



PERSIAN DANCING GIRL.



EGYPTIAN LADY IN NARROW SKIRT.

The following extract from Fullam will show that Fashion within the shadow of the Pyramids, in the days of the Pharaohs, reigned with power as potent and supreme as that which she exercises in the imperial palaces of Paris and Vienna at the present day:—

"The women of Egypt early paid considerable attention to their toilet. Their dress, according to Herodotus, consisted

usually of but one garment, though a second was often added. Among the upper orders the favourite attire was a petticoat tied round the waist with a gay sash, and worn under a robe of fine linen or a sort of chintz variously coloured, and made large and loose, with wide sleeves, the band being fastened in front just under the bust. Their feet were incased in sandals, the rudiment of the present Eastern slipper, which they resembled also in their embroidery and design. Their persons and apparel, in conformity with Oriental taste in all ages, were profusely decked with ornaments, 'jewels of silver and jewels of gold,' with precious gems of extraordinary size, of which imitations, hardly distinguishable from the real stones, were within the reach of the humblest classes, whose passion for finery could not be surpassed by their superiors. The richly carved and embroidered sandals, tied over the instep with tassels of gold, were surmounted by gold anklets or bangles, which, as well as the bracelets encircling the wrist, sparkled with rare gems; and necklaces of gold or of beautiful beads, with a pendant of amethysts or pearls, hung from the neck. Almost every finger was jewelled, and the ring finger in particular was usually allotted several rings, while massive earrings shaped like hoops, or sometimes taking the form of a jewelled asp or of a dragon, adorned the ears. Gloves were used at a very early date, and among the other imperishable relics of that olden time the tombs of Egypt have rendered up to us a pair of striped linen mittens, which once covered the hands of a Theban lady.

"Women of quality inclosed their hair with a band of gold, from which a flower drooped over the forehead, while the