

- Dress varies according to time, season, occasion, and age; but the young are the limit.

## WEARING THE RIGHT CLOTHES

A few years ago, when my son had about a year and a half to go before he graduated from college, I said to him: 'You've worked pretty hard and well, and if you keep it up for the next eighteen months, and you come out with a halfway decent degree, I'll give you the fare for a trip to Europe'. It was the first time I ever heard myself sounding like the fathers I knew in my time, all of them (I then believed) professional fathers born into middle age.

Of course, I thought my son would fall on his face with gratitude. Instead, he looked at me with the peculiar tenderness that twenty-year-olds reserve for their well-meaning but dotty parents. 'Dad', he said, 'I'm going to Europe a month from now'.

'Really', I said, 'and where do you expect to travel?'

'Oh', he said, 'a little time in Rome and Florence, a

month or so in Paris, maybe a stretch in Tangier'.

I wondered how he expected to live on his very frugal allowance. In staggered disbelief, he explained to me, with great simplicity and patience, some facts of life that had been kept from me. The summer vacation was coming up before his last academic year. His university had put on a charter flight to Europe — leave a certain date, return a certain date — at something less than half the usual fare. My son is a cagey mathematician where rent, food, and expenses are concerned, and he had done a calculation on which I could not fault him. Even including the cost of the transatlantic air trip, he could live noticeably cheaper for three months in Europe than he could be staying in his rooms in Cambridge, Mass.

Thousands and thousands of American college boys have discovered the same thing. Most of them live

cheerfully like cave-dwellers, anyway. A room as we knew it is not the same as a pad. We were ludicrously fastidious in my day, requiring such things as actual beds raised above the floor, curtains on windows, chairs for sitting on. These things are now looked on as Establishment fetishes. American college boys are throwbacks to the wandering minstrels of the Middle Ages. They live from hand to mouth. They have a common uniform — one pair of pants, one shirt, a jacket (maybe), a toothbrush (sometimes), and a guitar. You can never be sure these days whether they, and their girls, are American, English, Swedish, German, or even Russian.

I have said that it must be wonderful to be a travelling student, let alone a beatnik. What I had in mind was this uniformity of, well — uniform and habits. No niceties of dress or social behaviour disturb them. Every place they go, they are at home, with other wanderers from other lands who share exactly the same habits, especially the same freedom to

ignore the bourgeois society around them.

It is not so with middle-aged man who has, by now, acquired his own ideas of what to wear in given circumstances.

Providing merely for the change of weather is a cinch. The really subtle challenges come when you move from one country to another, one region of one country to another; worst of all, from one social milieu to another. My last three evenings in London were spent respectively at a rather toney dinner party, next evening at a cosy supper with my step-daughter, the last night at a 'happening' at Chalk Farm. No problem — except that at the 'happening' I must have looked like a fugitive from the Foreign Office in the nineteen-thirties — for I had on a suit (I mean the coat matched the trousers), a necktie, and a dark-blue topcoat. Everyone in sight wore jeans or stretch pants of silver lame, or beards, or leather jackets.

The American challenge is trickier. I know exactly how New Yorkers, of many social types, dress in winter,

spring, summer, fall. I know, for instance, that no woman with the slightest pretence to style wears white shoes, in summer or any other time, in New York city. But dressing in Hollywood, for example, so that you won't look either stuffy or flashy in the wrong way, is a separate trick that not one visitor in a hundred masters. They have at the back of their minds a picture of Hollywood — cigars, bikinis, klieg lights, bosoms. They *know* that Hollywood is more informal than, say, London. It is not so. They arrive at a Hollywood dinner party, maybe in a smart blue blazer, sleek slacks, a club tie, and black loafers. They are surrounded suddenly by men entirely in dark suits, white shirts, and conservative, tiny-patterned ties.

Or, say, you are a woman who has just left New York — in October — and you are attending a dinner party, of a congenial group, in Santa Barbara. Santa Barbara is only ninety miles from Hollywood, but it is the social width of the stratosphere away. Although October is a hot month, fashion dictates

that it is the fall. Although you could wear summer dresses all the year round, October is October; and the women put on fall clothes, darker colours, paler shoes. At the Santa Barbara dinner the other night there was a ravishing woman wearing a melon-pink suit of Thai silk. It became her greatly. We sat out on a terrace where it was, say, seventy-five degrees. She stood out like a firefly in the night. She was, needless to say, from the east — I mean the eastern United States — and I gathered she was thought, by her hosts, to be attractive but odd.

To many people, I am well aware, this may appear to be a very trivial theme in the great day of social upheaval and the equality of man. But I am told, at the United Nations, that even in China the uniform of Mao Tsetung has details that escape us — as indeed the physical difference between one Chinese and another does — but which signify to the faithful that his simple smock is not that of an ordinary party member, or a commissar, but the unique costume of the All-Highest.

It will be said that these are snobbish pre-occupations. I was going to say, 'Don't you believe it'. I prefer to say, 'Certainly they are'. And very important to go into, since we are all snobs. All of us have firm (however unspoken) ideas about what people should look like on given occasions. In this, fishermen and farmers are just as snobbish as debutantes and beatniks. There is no one, however mighty, who is not put off by some detail of dress he personally dislikes. I remember the morning one of the President's aides came in wearing

a button-down shirt (which started in America thirty years ago as an Ivy League fad, remained so until only a few years ago, and was swiftly abandoned when it spread to bond salesmen, then to mid-westerners, to cattle ranchers come to town. It is still retained by aging country-club types who have not noticed that they suddenly look old-fashioned). 'For heaven's sake', Kennedy said to his bewildered aide, 'take off that shirt. Nobody wears those things any more, except Chester Bowles and Adlai'. — *By Alistair Cooke, Letter from America.*