

On the Watchtower.

By JOSEPHUS.

One often hears disparaging remarks about the Jew's tendency to overdress. Mr. Chesterton has complained of the riotous colours which strike one so garishly on the Brighton pavilion, which, like that of Muizenberg is well patronised by Jews. It is therefore interesting to hear the opinion of an expert on the subject—i.e. an expert on clothes, or cloth, who has recently voiced his views on this topic. In a recent lecture on "A Retailers' View of Textiles," delivered at the Manchester Athenaeum to members of the British Association of Textile Managers, the lecturer paid a tribute to the Jewish sense of colour and described the East End of London as a dictator of fashion. There were, he said, usually about ten or twelve shades put forward as the season's colours; but, in the main the run on them was confined to three or four. Occasionally there would be a sudden demand for some specific colour. The origin of those special colour demands was in the East End of London. Jews had a remarkable taste for colour and colour combination. The lecturer had been told by a buyer, who had allowed himself to be guided by the East End choice, that in twenty years of buying he had never found it wrong.

It is characteristic that the East End has still the courage of its colours, while the West End seems to have lost faith in its flamboyancies and will only indulge in them when they have been legitimised by fashion; for the West has still faith in fashions even though it has no other faith. There seems, on the whole, to be a healthy return of colour in modern life. Our civilisation was becoming too anaemic, too subtly refined; we plumed ourselves with a decadent vanity on our delicate distinction of shades and nuances, discarding as vulgar the healthy cry of colour in its natural, unashamed vitality and variety.

The modern return to a bolder pigmentation of life is largely due to oriental, negro, and other primitive influences. We need strong meat to stimulate our jaded appetites, and we turn to those sources where convention and over-refinement have not yet stifled the primitive cry of life. But we really cannot digest that strong meat in its natural state, and in preparing it to suit our tastes and delicate stomachs we destroy its original virtue, deprive it of its strong sap, and merely retain a devitalised and somewhat barbarous product. Thus Jazz in colour and sound has lost much of its native negro vitality. Originally it came as a revolt, the revolt of the individual against the enforced harmony of the band. While the orchestra played some given song each man otherwise played as piercingly as he could, in competition with his fellows, whatever he pleased. But this insubordinate attempt of one number of an orchestra to seize attention by startling or amusing the listeners has been suppressed; the mischievous and humorous tradition has been forgotten and there merely remains a deliberate and brutally sensual suggestiveness which is quite suitable to express the unrestrained vitality and unbridled passion of the savage, but in our case it can only express our decadence—our inability to be either primitive or civilised.

In colour, too, jazz has a conventionalized garishness rather than a natural and exuberant vitality, because, I suppose, it does not express us but merely acts as an exotic stimulant. The trouble is, that whereas to the healthy oriental, or negro, bright colours and their bold arrangement act as a natural expression of sap and vitality as in the case of nature, with us, our colour-schemes are mostly mere decoration. While genuine expression is always legitimate, decoration is subject to convention and all the social taboos. Nature is never ashamed of her flaming sunsets, but a well-dressed woman will subject all her colours and shades to the most rigorous censorship.

Personally, I have never been struck by riotous behaviour on the part of colours, in Jewish gatherings. The Jew is essentially an auditive type and will thus give vent to his exuberance in a natural way instead of being loud in his dress. He will register his protest against the rigours of a conventional space-and-time system by coming late to a performance, by sitting in the best seat which is not necessarily his reserved seat, and by giving his unreserved judgment of the performance before the hearing of it has been completed, but his (or her) dress is usually correct, or if anything, humble and unassertive. The truth is, the ordinary Jew you meet in the street is nondescript in pigmentation, while some sin on the side of anaemia. There is especially one type of Jew whom I have been meeting with alarming frequency in the vicinity of the editor's office, and who has been depressing me by the severe asceticism of his dress. He belongs, I think, to the much-maligned meshulloch caste which now shades off into varieties whose classification has become so different as to challenge the question: when is a meshulloch not a meshulloch? He wears a black coat which never seems to end; in fact, at the level where the black coat of the professional man finds a seam and a consummation, his only starts on a parting of the ways which seems ominous. His head is surmounted by a black hat, and a black beard frames a pale face which affords the only contrast in colour. He may be a study in black and white, unless he is a symbol of that struggle between light and darkness of which the prophet spoke with such passion.

Be this as it may, I refuse to recognise this garb as representative of Jewish dress. For my own part, I have been hankering, since my childhood, after that coat of many colours which Jacob presented to his favourite son Joseph, thus arousing the jealousy of his brothers. Compared to this gorgeous garment my own blazer is a tame affair, and yet many a good Jew has looked askance at it, thinking, no doubt, that my wearing it was incompatible with my position as defender of the Faith.

Let us not be afraid of anti-Semitic Jew-baiting; the Jew should have the courage of his colours. Mr. Chesterton should remember that the Jew has pinned his faith to the rainbow on which he looks as the symbol of his covenant with God. This seems to me a more natural and picturesque form of idealism than that pompous and cumbrous form of it which requires you to hitch your wagon to a star.

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