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IN a newspaper article not so long ago, Capt. Basil Henry Liddell-Hart, a British military analyst, let himself go on the subject of women's clothes. This was unwise of the captain. It is unwise of any man.

Capt. Liddell-Hart, however, went a little beyond the ordinary male habit of picking on women's hats and the cost of feminine ornament. He proceeded to hail feminine style as a barometer of social change. His theory was that you could predict the political weather by a good gander at milady's bustle. He spoke of the "tranquil hoopskirts of the tranquil early 19th century." He said, "When women begin to flatten their figures and wear exaggerated hats, there is trouble brewing."

Well, we like nothing better than seeing a two-pipper go out on a limb, so we grabbed the captain's statement, neatly clipped from the morning paper, and rushed down to quiz Miss Elizabeth Hawes on her reactions to same. We thought they would be worth hearing.

We picked on Miss Hawes because, of all the women we could think of at the moment, she seemed most completely to combine clothes and articulate opinions. Her whole life up till now has been a busy mixture of the two and it shows no signs of abating to placidity.

Miss Hawes went to Vassar in the 1920s. She graduated and went to Europe, where she studied dress designing and wrote for the *New Yorker*. She came home to the U.S. in 1929, started her own dress business and wrote two books. Both the books and the dress business were overwhelmingly successful as very damn little else that started in 1929 was successful. In the books and in her business, she crusaded for more sensible clothes for both men and women. She gave up her business in 1939 and went to work on the new New York newspaper *PM*; she acted as a buying counselor to make up for the paper's ban on advertising. She left *PM* and went to work in an airplane-engine plant. She wrote another book. She left the airplane-engine plant to devote all her time to the UAW-CIO Education Department. Now she's momentarily sloughed off everything else to write her first novel.

If there was anyone who could give us the pukka gen on Capt. Liddell-Hart's remark, we thought, Miss Hawes was it.

Miss Hawes answered our insistent bell-ringing and let us into her apartment. She poured us a cup of coffee and asked, What was it?

She was wearing a checked shirt—wool, we thought—open at the collar, and blue slacks, softly pale with much washing, patched with a darker blue square on one knee. We showed her the Liddell-Hart clipping.

She read for a second and tossed the clipping down, digested.

"He's all right, but he doesn't go far enough," she said. "And he puts the cart before the horse."

"The way he says it, it sounds as if you should look at women's clothes to find out what's going on in the world. It's the other way around. Look at what's going on in the world and you know what women's clothes are going to be like."

"Ask any designer if she wouldn't give good money to know what conditions were going to be like in advance. If you know what conditions are, you can guess what kind of clothes will be in demand."

She thought for a moment, balancing her own coffee cup on her knee.

"But it works both ways," she said. "There was something Anatole France said—but maybe I'm being highbrow?"

We hastened to reassure her that every GI knew who Anatole France was and, if he didn't, we could always put somewhere in the story that he was a famous French writer, born 1844, died 1924.

"Anatole France said something about if there was one book he could have in the afterworld he would want a book of current women's fashions," Miss Hawes said. "From looking at the fashions he could tell what was going on in the world, whether people were happy or afraid or at war or at peace."

It seemed very simple, for Anatole France or Elizabeth Hawes.

"But Liddell-Hart's wrong about 'trouble brewing' when styles are unnatural," Miss Hawes took up the bit again. "Trouble isn't brewing when styles are unnatural; trouble is already there. Styles are direct; they reflect what's going on, not what's going to go on."

Clothes and things

Elizabeth Hawes



WE asked her what signs, if any, were abroad in styles now, that the wise man might look and learn.

"There's nothing much startling to learn," she said. "Only that things haven't changed much. If anything, clothes have gone backwards since the war. They aren't as experimental or, usually, as comfortable as they were getting to be."

"I was in Cleveland last week, getting some work done, and I talked to a lot of girls. Mostly kids in war plants and so on. They were worrying about whether their skirts were too short."

We lifted an eyebrow.

"Women are nervous now," Miss Hawes said. "All their men are coming home and the women don't know how their men will want them to be. They know the skirts ought to be pretty high. But how high?"

"It's a problem for a woman," she said, sliding away from the original subject in her enthusiasm. "Lots of them dress like tramps, particularly upper-class women. And their men like them to dress like tramps up to a certain point. Then they begin to worry. The girls are worrying before that."

"The girl wants to dress enough like a tramp to attract her man's attention in the first place and not so much like a tramp that he thinks he doesn't have to marry her."

We never got a chance to ask Miss Hawes by what signs one could tell infallibly whether a girl had her mind set on marriage or on something a little less binding.

"The girls are out to get married now and the GIs coming back better look out," she said and was off again with her commentary on Capt. Liddell-Hart.

"One reason clothes seem to be falling into the same pattern as after the last war," she said, "is because they are the same. Designers here are just copying old Paris patterns of the '20s. I know; I swiped 'em in the '20s and I can still recognize them."

"But what the captain missed noticing is men's clothes. Men's clothes reflect events just as much as women's and quicker and more accurately. After all, it's men who run most things and make policy, so their clothes are a better barometer."

"Before the war, men's clothes were beginning to get a little more sensible. You saw slack suits in the streets, even delivery boys would be wearing them—light trousers and an open-collar shirt of matching color. They were cool and comfortable. Some of them had a little color to them and quite normal men were not ashamed to wear them."

(continued)

Clothes and things

"In the summers you found men going to offices in shirts without ties. You know, shirts made to be worn without ties—long collars. Not everybody wore them, but some very respectable business men could be seen getting by with them, say on a hot Saturday morning when they had to go to the office. I'm afraid all that's been thrown for a loss.

"I've heard some GIs talk about wearing something comfortable like a battle jacket, civilian-styled. But the way they talk, you know they'll never wear one. It's just hopeful talk. They'll go back to coats and ties and all the rest of it.

"People still write me about clothes; some soldiers write me. But they're all the type of people who would be interested in something new anyway. There's no real over-all change of feeling about clothes in men."

We asked her if she could name us any obvious evidence of the war as shown by clothes.

"Well, the clothes the leaders wore," she said, thinking. "Roosevelt's cape was military and that sort of tunic of Stalin's, and then there was Churchill's siren suit. That last was most typical of all, because he didn't keep on wearing it. Only as long as things still looked tough. While the war was in the balance, he wore the siren suit. It was a comfortable, sensible garment and it looked good and businesslike.

"But as soon as it began to be pretty certain that the Axis was losing, as soon as he knew what his own plans were for the future, back he went into the old familiar conservative statesman's dress of trousers, shirt and coat."

We asked Miss Hawes one final question: What shape would clothes take in the future?

"Every shape," she said. "Clothes are a good sign that the people of the world are getting to know each other. Not uniformity in clothes, but the fact that we are moving toward a time when a woman in New York can dress in something Chinese if it's comfortable and if she likes it, and a woman in China can wear a New York-style dress.

"Important people the world over have dressed as they pleased—and somewhat similarly—for some time. Cartels and clothes, they go together in that sense. But eventually an exchange of ideas all over the world may be reflected in clothes all over the world with all people. Why not?"

We left thinking that Capt. Liddell-Hart had not come off too badly, that Miss Hawes had come off very well, and that we, ourself, could thank our lucky stars that we were married already. Watch that danger line, men, somewhere around the knee!

