

Literature.org:
[Authors](#)
[Contact](#)

[Eight Cousins](#)

[Louisa May Alcott](#)

This Book:
[Contents](#)
[Previous Chapter](#)
[Next Chapter](#)

Chapter 18 - Fashion And Physiology

"Please, sir, I guess you'd better step up right away, or it will be too late, for I heard Miss Rose say she knew you wouldn't like it, and she'd never dare to let you see her."

Phebe said this as she popped her head into the study, where Dr. Alec sat reading a new book.

"They are at it, are they?" he said, looking up quickly, and giving himself a shake, as if ready for a battle of some sort.

"Yes, sir, as hard as they can talk, and Miss Rose don't seem to know what to do, for the things are ever so stylish, and she looks elegant in 'em; though I like her best in the old ones," answered Phebe.

"You are a girl of sense. I'll settle matters for Rosy, and you'll lend a hand. Is everything ready in her room, and are you sure you understand how they go?"

"Oh, yes, sir; but they are so funny! I know Miss Rose will think it's a joke," and Phebe laughed as if something tickled her immensely.

"Never mind what she thinks so long as she obeys. Tell her to do it for my sake, and she will find it the best joke she ever saw. I expect to have a tough time of it, but we'll win yet," said the Doctor, as he marched upstairs with the book in his hand, and an odd smile on his face.

There was such a clatter of tongues in the sewing-room that no one heard his tap at the door, so he pushed it open and took an observation. Aunt Plenty, Aunt Clara, and Aunt Jessie were all absorbed in gazing at Rose, who slowly revolved between them and the great mirror, in a full winter costume of the latest fashion.

"Bless my heart! worse even than I expected," thought the Doctor, with an inward groan, for, to his benighted eyes, the girl looked like a trussed fowl, and the fine new dress had neither grace, beauty, nor fitness to recommend it.

The suit was of two peculiar shades of blue, so arranged that patches of light and dark distracted the eye. The upper skirt was tied so lightly back that it was impossible to take a long step, and the under one was so loaded with plaited frills that it "wobbled" no other word will express it ungracefully, both fore and aft. A bunch of folds was gathered up just below the waist behind, and a great bow rode a-top. A small jacket of the same material was adorned with a high ruff at the back, and laid well open over the breast, to display some lace and a locket. Heavy fringes, bows, puffs, ruffles, and revers finished off the dress, making one's head ache to think of the amount of work wasted, for not a single graceful line struck the eye, and the beauty of the material was quite lost in the profusion of ornament.

A high velvet hat, audaciously turned up in front, with a bunch of pink roses and a sweeping plume, was cocked over one ear, and, with her curls braided into a club at the back of her neck, Rose's head looked more like that of a dashing young cavalier than a modest little girl's. High-heeled boots tilted her well forward, a tiny muff pinioned her arms, and a spotted veil, tied so closely over her face that her eyelashes were rumpled by it, gave the last touch of absurdity to her appearance.

"Now she looks like other girls, and as I like to see her," Mrs. Clara was saying, with an air of great satisfaction.

"She does look like a fashionable young lady, but somehow I miss my little Rose, for children dressed like children in my day," answered Aunt Plenty, peering through her glasses with a troubled look, for she could not imagine the creature before her ever sitting in her lap, running to wait upon her, or making the house gay with a child's blithe presence.

"Things have changed since your day, Aunt, and it takes time to get used to new ways. But you, Jessie, surely like this costume better than the dowdy things Rose has been wearing all summer. Now, be honest, and own you do," said Mrs. Clara, bent on being praised for her work.

"Well, dear to be quite honest, then, I think it is frightful," answered Mrs. Jessie, with a candour that caused revolving Rose to stop in dismay.

"Hear, hear," cried a deep voice, and with a general start the ladies became aware that the enemy was among them.

Rose blushed up to her hat brim, and stood, looking, as she felt, like a fool, while Mrs. Clara hastened to explain.

"Of course, I don't expect you to like it, Alec, but I don't consider you a judge of what is proper and becoming for a young lady. Therefore, I have taken the liberty of providing a pretty street suit for Rose. She need not wear it if you object, for I know we promised to let you do what you liked with the poor dear for a year."

"It is a street costume, is it?" asked the Doctor, mildly. "Do you know, I never should have guessed that it was meant for winter weather and brisk locomotion. Take a turn, Rosy, and let me see all its beauties and advantages."

Rose tried to walk off with her usual free tread, but the under-skirt got in her way, the over-skirt was so tight she could not take a long step, and her boots made it impossible to carry herself perfectly erect.

"I haven't got used to it yet," she said, petulantly, kicking at her train, as she turned to toddle back again.

"Suppose a mad dog or a runaway horse was after you, could you get out of the way without upsetting, Colonel," asked the Doctor, with a twinkle in the eyes that were fixed on the rakish hat.

"Don't think I could, but I'll try," and Rose made a rush across the room. Her boot-heels caught on a rug, several strings broke, her hat tipped over her eyes, and she plunged promiscuously into a chair, where she sat laughing so infectiously that all but Mrs. Clara joined in her mirth.

"I should say that a walking suit in which one could not walk, and a winter suit which exposes the throat, head, and feet to cold and damp, was rather a failure, Clara, especially as it has no beauty to reconcile one to its utter unfitness," said Dr. Alec, as he helped Rose undo her veil, adding, in a low tone, "Nice thing for the eyes; you'll soon see spots when it's off as well as when it's on, and, by and by, be a case for an oculist."

"No beauty!" cried Mrs. Clara, warmly, "Now, that is just a man's blindness. This is the best of silk and camel's hair, real ostrich feathers, and an expensive ermine muff. What could be in better taste, or more proper for a young girl?"

"I'll shew you, if Rose will go to her room and oblige me by putting on what she finds there," answered the Doctor, with unexpected readiness.

"Alec, if it is a Bloomer, I shall protest. I've been expecting it, but I know I cannot bear to see that pretty child sacrificed to your wild ideas of health. Tell me it isn't a Bloomer!" and Mrs. Clara clasped her hands imploringly.

"It is not."

"Thank Heaven!" and she resigned herself with a sigh of relief, adding plaintively, "I did hope you'd accept my suit, for poor Rose has been afflicted with frightful clothes long enough to spoil the taste of any girl."

"You talk of my afflicting the child, and then make a helpless guy like that of her!" answered the Doctor, pointing to the little fashion plate that was scuttling out of sight as fast as it could go.

He closed the door with a shrug, but before anyone could speak, his quick eye fell upon an object which caused him to frown, and demand in an indignant tone

"After all I have said, were you really going to tempt my girl with those abominable things?"

"I thought we put them away when she wouldn't wear them," murmured Mrs. Clara, whisking a little pair of corsets out of sight with guilty haste. "I only brought them to try, for Rose is growing stout, and will have no figure if it is not attended to soon," she added, with an air of calm conviction that roused the Doctor still more, for this was one of his especial abominations.

"Growing stout! Yes, thank Heaven, she is, and shall continue to do it, for Nature knows how to mould a woman better than any corset-maker, and I won't have her interfered with. My dear Clara, have you lost your senses that you can for a moment dream of putting a growing girl into an instrument of torture like this?" and with a sudden gesture he plucked forth the offending corsets from under the sofa cushion, and held them out with the expression one would wear on beholding the thumbscrews or the rack of ancient times.

"Don't be absurd, Alec. There is no torture about it, for tight lacing is out of fashion, and we have nice, sensible things nowadays. Everyone wears them; even babies have stiffened waists to support their weak little backs," began Mrs. Clara, rushing to the defence of the pet delusion of most women.

"I know it, and so the poor little souls have weak backs all their days, as their mothers had before them. It is vain to argue the matter, and I won't try, but I wish to state, once for all, that if I ever see a pair of corsets near Rose, I'll put them in the fire, and you may send the bill to me."

As he spoke the corsets were on their way to destruction, but Mrs. Jessie caught his arm, exclaiming merrily, "Don't burn them, for mercy sake, Alec; they are full of whalebones, and will make a dreadful odour. Give them to me. I'll see that they do no harm."

"Whalebones, indeed! A regular fence of them, and metal gate-posts in front. As if our own bones were not enough, if we'd give them a chance to do their duty," growled the Doctor, yielding up the bone of contention with a last shake of contempt. Then his face cleared suddenly, and he held up his finger, saying, with a smile, "Hear those girls laugh; cramped lungs could not make hearty music like that."

Peals of laughter issued from Rose's room, and smiles involuntarily touched the lips of those who listened to the happy sound.

"Some new prank of yours, Alec?" asked Aunt Plenty, indulgently, for she had come to believe in most of her nephew's odd notions, because they seemed to work so well.

"Yes, ma'am, my last, and I hope you will like it. I discovered what Clara was at, and got my rival suit ready for to-day. I'm not going to 'afflict' Rose, but let her choose, and if I'm not entirely mistaken, she will like my rig best. While we wait I'll explain, and then you will appreciate the general effect better. I got hold of this little book, and was struck with its good sense and good taste, for it suggests a way to clothe women both healthfully and handsomely, and that is a great point. It begins at the foundations, as you will see if you will look at these pictures, and I should think women would rejoice at this lightening of their burdens."

As he spoke, the Doctor laid the book before Aunt Plenty, who obediently brought her spectacles to bear upon the illustrations, and after a long look exclaimed, with a scandalised face

"Mercy on us, these things are like the night-drawers Jamie wears! You don't mean to say you want Rose to come out in this costume? It's not proper, and I won't consent to it!"

"I do mean it, and I'm sure my sensible aunt will consent when she understands that these well I'll call them by an Indian name, and say pajamas are for underwear, and Rose can have as pretty frocks as she likes outside. These two suits of flannel, each in one piece from head to foot, with a skirt or so hung on this easily-fitting waist, will keep the child warm without burdening her with belts, and gathers, and buckles, and bunches round the waist, and leave free the muscles that need plenty of room to work in. She shall never have the back-ache if I can help it, nor the long list of ills you dear women think you cannot escape."

"I don't consider it modest, and I'm sure Rose will be shocked at it," began Mrs. Clara, but stopped suddenly, as Rose appeared in the doorway, not looking shocked a bit.

"Come on, my hygienic model, and let us see you," said her uncle, with an approving glance, as she walked in, looking so mischievously merry, that it was evident she enjoyed the joke.

"Well, I don't see anything remarkable. That is a neat, plain suit; the materials are good, and it's not unbecoming, if you want her to look like a little school-girl; but it has not a particle of style, and no one would ever give it a second glance," said Mrs. Clara, feeling that her last remark condemned the whole thing.

"Exactly what I want," answered the provoking Doctor, rubbing his hands with a satisfied air. "Rosy looks now like what she is, a modest little girl, who does not want to be stared at. I think she would get a glance of approval, though, from people who like sense and simplicity rather than fuss and feathers. Revolve, my Hebe, and let me refresh my eyes by the sight of you."

There was very little to see, however, only a pretty Gabrielle dress, of a soft warm shade of brown, coming to the tops of a trim pair of boots with low heels. A seal-skin sack, cap, and mittens, with a glimpse of scarlet at the throat, and the pretty curls tied up with a bright velvet of the same colour, completed the external adornment, making her look like a robin redbreast wintry, yet warm.

"How do you like it, Rosy?" asked the Doctor, feeling that her opinion was more important to the success of his new idea than that of all the aunts on the hill.

"I feel very odd and light, but I'm warm as a toast, and nothing seems to be in my way," answered Rose, with a skip which displayed shapely gaiters on legs that now might be as free and active as a boy's under the modest skirts of the girl.

"You can run away from the mad dogs, and walk off at a smart pace without tumbling on your nose, now, I fancy?"

"Yes, uncle! suppose the dog coming, I just hop over a wall so and when I walk of a cold day, I go like this "

Entering fully into the spirit of the thing, Rose swung herself over the high back of the sofa as easily as one of her cousins, and then went down the long hall as if her stout boots were related to the famous seven-leaguers.

"There! you see how it will be; dress her in that boyish way and she will act like a boy. I do hate all these inventions of strong-minded women!" exclaimed Mrs. Clara, as Rose came back at a run.

"Ah, but you see some of these sensible inventions come from the brain of a fashionable modiste, who will make you more lovely, or what you value more 'stylish' outside and comfortable within. Mrs. Van Tassel has been to Madame Stone, and is wearing a full suit of this sort. Van himself told me, when I asked how she was, that she had given up lying on the sofa, and was going about in a most astonishing way, considering her feeble health."

"You don't say so! Let me see that book a moment," and Aunt Clara examined the new patterns with a more respectful air, for if the elegant Mrs. Van Tassel wore these "dreadful things" it would never do to be left behind, in spite of her prejudices.

Dr. Alec looked at Mrs. Jessie, and both smiled, for "little Mum" had been in the secret, and enjoyed it mightily.

"I thought that would settle it," he said with a nod.

"I didn't wait for Mrs. Van to lead the way, and for once in my life I have adopted a new fashion before Clara. My freedom suit is ordered, and you may see me playing tag with Rose and the boys before long," answered Mrs. Jessie, nodding back at him.

Meantime Aunt Plenty was examining Rose's costume, for the hat and sack were off, and the girl was eagerly explaining the new under-garments.

"See, auntie, all nice scarlet flannel, and a gay little petticoat, and long stockings, oh, so warm! Phebe and I nearly died laughing when I put this rig on, but I like it ever so much. The dress is so comfortable, and doesn't need any belt or sash, and I can sit without rumpling any trimming, that's such a comfort! I like to be tidy, and so, when I wear fussed-up things, I'm thinking of my clothes all the time, and that's tiresome. Do say you like it. I resolved I would, just to please uncle, for he does know more about health than anyone else, I'm sure, and I'd wear a bag if he asked me to do it."

"I don't ask that, Rose, but I wish you'd weigh and compare the two suits, and then choose which seems best. I leave it to your own commonsense," answered Dr. Alec, feeling pretty sure he had won.

"Why, I take this one, of course, uncle. The other is fashionable, and yes I must say I think it's pretty but it's very heavy, and I should have to go round like a walking doll if I wore it. I'm much obliged to auntie, but I'll keep this, please."

Rose spoke gently but decidedly, though there was a look of regret when her eye fell on the other suit which Phebe had brought in; and it was very natural to like to look as other girls did. Aunt Clara sighed; Uncle Alec smiled, and said heartily

"Thank you, dear; now read this book and you will understand why I ask it of you. Then, if you like, I'll give you a new lesson; you asked for one yesterday, and this is more necessary than French or housekeeping."

"Oh, what?" and Rose caught up the book which Mrs. Clara had thrown down with a disgusted look.

Though Dr. Alec was forty, the boyish love of teasing was not yet dead in him, and, being much elated at his victory, he could not resist the temptation of shocking Mrs. Clara by suggesting dreadful possibilities, so he answered, half in earnest, half in jest, "Physiology, Rose. Wouldn't you like to be a little medical student, with Uncle Doctor for teacher, and be ready to take up his practice when he has to stop? If you agree, I'll hunt up my old skeleton to-morrow."

That was too much for Aunt Clara, and she hastily departed, with her mind in a sad state of perturbation about Mrs. Van Tassel's new costume and Rose's new study.