

CHAPTER VIII

WOMAN'S LIFE AND FASHIONS

AT Athens, more than anywhere else in Greece, the woman was thrust, both publicly and socially, into the background. We must not confuse the Athenian woman of classical times with the free and influential Achaean woman of the days of Homer. We have already given some explanation of the difference, but we may repeat here that it was partly due to the peculiar racial character of the Athenians, more to the altered conditions of life in a populous and closely packed city, and still more to the extremely democratic life of the male Athenian, which made his home of comparatively little account.

It has already been remarked that, when women had thus become secluded, their sphere of operations limited, their character weakened, and their education neglected, it became customary to look upon them as naturally and inevitably inferior to men, both intellectually and morally. This was not only the opinion of the vulgar, it was held by philosophers like Aristotle. Experience and observation of women, as they were, led him to take for granted that woman was "in general an inferior being," and it was only an unusually and audaciously speculative Plato who could suggest that the difference was due rather to circumstances than to nature. Yet even in Plato the special excellence of a woman is elsewhere stated to be "to

keep house well and obey her husband." It would be easy to collect numerous utterances of poets, philosophers, and orators, to support this text, and also that of Ajax in Sophocles, "Woman, women are adorned by silence."

The Athenian did not, it is true, keep his wife imprisoned after the manner of the Turk, nor did he entertain so low a view of her relation to himself; but he did theoretically maintain that, unless on special occasions and for good and sufficient cause shown, her place was inside the house, and her range limited by the street door. In practice she enjoyed much more liberty, but this was at least the theory.

It follows that, since her functions were so limited, her education as a girl was correspondingly meagre. If she learned to read and write, or play on a musical instrument — as she certainly often did — it was not according to a recognised system of education. The mother or some attendant might impart this knowledge, if she possessed it; but the usual feeling of the Athenian was one expressed in Euripides, that a woman was none the better for being too clever intellectually. Her youthful training was therefore directed towards her domestic duties. She learned spinning and weaving and working embroidery, so that she might do these things in her own household, and also teach and direct her female slaves in these arts. She also learned plain cooking and domestic management; for she would eventually be called upon to conduct a household of both male and female servants and to control the storeroom. But beyond this her education did not go. "To see as little as possible, to hear as little as possible, and to ask as few questions as possible," is Xenophon's statement of the ideal educational career of a girl.

As a little child her life was probably happy enough. She had the domestic courtyard to play in, and she was furnished with toys and pet animals to play with. Dolls of earthenware or wax, painted and furnished with movable legs and arms, were abundant. Swings were hung under the verandah in the



FIG. 41. — Swing.

court. Mothers and nurses were kind, and she might be taken up to the roof of the house to see processions in the streets. Her little brothers played about with her till their seventh year. She might come in to dessert when dinner was but a family affair, and her mid-day meal she often took with her parents in the court.

As she grows older she receives the domestic instruction before mentioned, and the nearer she comes to marriageable age the more regard she must have to modesty of deportment. Theoretically the unmarried girl must not be seen outside the middle door, which separates the women's quarters from those of the more open house. If she goes abroad, it is with some elder female in charge, in order to take part in one of the great festive religious processions, or in a funeral ceremony, or to visit some temple. So far as she is seen of men, it must be on such occasions, and, so far as she herself sees other men than those of her immediate family, it must be either then or when she peeps from the window in the upper storey, or is permitted to look down from the roof into the street on procession days. There was thus little opportunity among the well-to-do classes for falling in love, whether at first sight or at any time. Nevertheless such a thing did very occasionally happen, and Athenian youths, it may be remarked, were highly inflammable. To them beauty made strong appeals, and the appeal was not weakened by the sense of difficulty and mystery.

Yet, after all, love mattered little so far as the girl's future was concerned. Let us imagine her to be now of marriageable age, which may be anywhere from fifteen to twenty. We will, for convenience, call her Pasiclea. Pasiclea's father or other guardian—if not her father, her nearest male kinsman—is prepared to give her a dowry of certain dimensions, and he is looking about for a suitable match. If she has no father, the nearest male kinsman, provided he is a bachelor himself and is not a full brother nor in the direct line of descent, has the first claim to marry her himself. If he is unable or disinclined, he either fixes eyes upon some suitable citizen, perhaps quite young, but

preferably upwards of thirty or thirty-five, or he employs for the purpose a professional matchmaker — a woman, one need hardly say. It is, of course, the most natural proceeding to consider first the circle of his acquaintance and the sons of his friends, but, before all things, equality of pecuniary position is sought on both sides. The Athenians had in this connection the proverb "keep to your own track." If Pasioles's father or guardian knew of no suitable match, the matchmaker discovered one for him, although, ~~truth to tell~~, it was probably more commonly her task to find and win over a suitable wife for some man whose time had come to settle down.

Meanwhile the proposed bridegroom was being induced to marry by one of two considerations. For the most part marriage was felt to be a burden and an embarrassment. According to Euripides, woman was a "necessary evil." ~~We must, it is true, discount the attitude of Euripides.~~ When it was remarked to Sophocles that his brother poet was a woman-hater, he replied "Yes, in his tragedies." Nevertheless, the attitude of the poet was fairly general. The legislator Solon was asked to penalise bachelors, but he could not find it in his heart, for, he said, "a wife is a heavy load to carry." If therefore an Athenian who had enjoyed no opportunity of falling in love was considering matrimony, it was either because his father was insisting upon it, or because of a consideration which is nowadays not quite so easy to understand, but which was then exceedingly potent. Every citizen desired to leave behind him some one, not merely for the usual and natural motives, such as to continue his family and inherit his possessions, but, before and above all, to bury him and pay due honours to his body and his tomb. The attitude of the Athenian towards the after-

world belongs to the discussion of Athenian religion, but thus much should be said here, that the comfort and honour of the dead in the region beyond death were held to depend upon the attentions paid to the corpse and to the place where it was buried. A ghost who had no posterity on earth was in a lamentable plight in Hades. Apart from the pressure of public opinion and ideas of good form, from the encouragement of the state, and from considerations of his old age and its environment, the citizen had this strong motive prompting him to undertake what otherwise he might have been disposed to avoid.

Well, a match for Pasiclea is made. If it is ideal, she will be about eighteen, and her future husband about thirty-two. Women aged rapidly in Greece, and this difference of age was therefore regarded as some sort of adjustment.

The first and most important ceremony was the betrothal, at which, by the way, it was not in the least necessary that the girl should be present. Properly speaking, the affair is a contract between persons entitled so to contract, and the girl has no standing in the matter. A dowry is agreed upon, and a solemn "pledging" is performed in the presence of witnesses. Without this "giving away," as it was called, an Athenian marriage is invalid. There was no such thing as a marriage in the presence of priests or of representatives of the state. Indeed there was no church at all in our sense of the word. The only ceremony after the pledging was the "fetching home," which took place at a later day and which we may regard as the actual wedding. This previous solemnity before witnesses is therefore indispensable. So far as the dowry was concerned, belonged to the wife, must be given back if she was divorced,

and when she died, it went, not to her husband, but to her nearest of kin. A consequence of this position was that a wealthy wife sometimes became the predominant partner and kept her husband in submission to the power of the purse.

The actual wedding of *Pasiela* will take place when the moon is near the full, and probably in the winter. Before the ceremony sacrifices to the gods of marriage will be made in both houses, and a sort of sacramental bathing will be *de rigueur*. The groom, perfumed and dressed in his gayest, and wearing a wreath, arrives, together with his best man, his parents, and his friends at the home of the bride, which he finds decorated at the doors with olive and laurel boughs. There the marriage feast is prepared, and prominent at that feast is the good old wedding-cake, made, at Athens, chiefly of pounded sesame-seeds mixed with honey. On this occasion the men and women for once feast together, but the women do not recline; they are seated together on the opposite side of the room from the men. The bride is all the time veiled, and some of the party, even including the groom, may never have seen her face. Nevertheless, the party is festive and conversation is general, as we perceive from a passage in Theophrastus, who, talking of the *gaucheries* committed by the Inopportune Man, remarks that "when he is a guest at a wedding he is the sort of man to run down the female sex." The feast over, and evening having come, a flute-player is heard at the door; the respective mothers light each a pair of torches; the bride, veiled all the time, is led out to a carriage or some sort of vehicle, where she seats herself between the groom and the best man, who are standing. Before them go the flute-players, and before and around them a procession of friends, singing that hymeneal

song which, in its inevitableness, corresponds somewhat to our wedding march. Behind walks the mother of the bride, carrying her torches. Meanwhile the people in the streets cheer them and wish them joy with no little blending of facetiousness. At the bridegroom's door, which is also decorated, the bride is formally received by his mother; confetti are scattered over the party; Pasiclea eats a piece of quince — an emblem, possibly, because of its bitter-sweetness, of our



FIG. 42. — Marriage procession to fetch the bride.

“for better or worse” — and she is led into the house. A chorus of girls sing a song known as the epithalamion, and the party disperses.

On the following day, which is called the “unveiling,” the newly married couple are “at home” to their friends. Sometimes they have already been honoured by a morning song at the door. Pasiclea unveils herself, and receives the wedding presents which the visitors have brought, including vases, dishes, slippers and sandals, mirrors, combs, soaps, perfumes,

and whatsoever other things were most affected before fish-slices and hair-brushes were invented.

From this time forward she is mistress of the house, allots duties, and dispenses stores. She wakes the slaves, if necessary, in the morning, instructs them in their tasks, and carries the keys. She will herself perform a fair amount of spinning and



FIG. 43. — Girl with distaff.

weaving. At the latter she will get no little exercise, and, if she does her work in the courtyard, a fair amount of fresh air also. She must be strict in her discipline, for the Athenian slave had his or her foibles. There were, it is true, no cats, but weasels and harmless snakes were employed to keep down the mice, and when anything was broken, or when food mysteriously

disappeared, it was usual for the slave to declare that "it must have been the weasel." Pasiclea is herself a young lady of proper instincts. She is not wasteful, and she does not drink wine, as some older and less refined Athenian women appear to have done too frequently. Her husband will, therefore, never be guilty, as others sometimes were, of the severity, or the meanness, of locking up the storeroom and sealing the door.

Her position is beyond question entirely subordinate, but it is one in which she is respected and can respect herself. Her

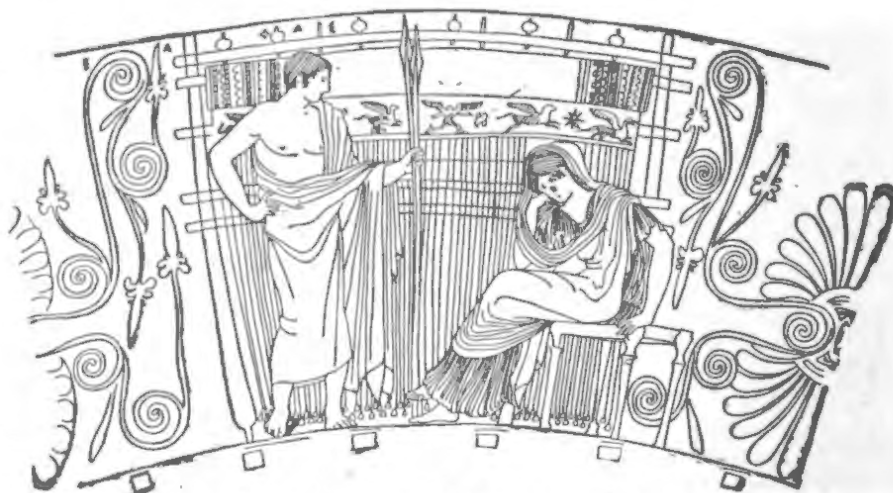


FIG. 44.—Penelope at her loom.

husband may, or may not, permit her to talk politics at lunch or family dinner. That wives often did this, or attempted it, is certain. Complains one lady in Aristophanes: "Then we would ask: 'Husband, how came you men to bungle this business so stupidly?' And he would promptly scowl and say that if I didn't attend to my spinning, I should be very sorry for myself." Yet even if her spouse were thus contemptuous, there were two things which, if he was a gentleman, he would not do. He would not permit any man to speak rudely or unbecomingly in the presence of his women-folk, and

he would not put himself in any undignified position which would humiliate him before them. Demosthenes, in a famous passage, enlarges on the mortification of a man who is compelled to hide from an unreasonable arrest by climbing over his neighbour's roof, or creeping under a bed, or otherwise cutting a poor figure "in the sight of his own wife, to whom he betrothed himself in the character of a free man and a citizen of the state." Nor is there any reason to disbelieve that the domestic relations were often accompanied by a tolerable degree of affection on either side.

Yet, with all this, *Pasieles*'s married life would be regarded in these days as extremely monotonous. During her younger years, at least, she will be kept much within doors. If she goes out, it will be theoretically with her husband's consent, and accompanied by a female attendant. Even if the husband was indulgent, public opinion had to be consulted. According to one of the orators, "the woman who goes out of doors ought to be of such an age that those who meet her may ask, not whose wife she is, but whose mother she is."

We may, perhaps, be of opinion that all this insistence of good advice on the part of poets and orators is but a sign that the strict rule of seclusion was a good deal honoured in the breach. We know that women often did walk out with their attendants, that they certainly went out occasionally to purchase things, that they paid visits to each other and talked gossip and dress, and that they sometimes asked each other to lunch. Moreover, there were certain recognised occasions on which they were expected to move abroad. They went to the theatre to see the tragedies performed, although apparently they were not allowed, or at least countenanced — and a good

thing too—at the comedies. They went to the great processions, and to the mysteries. There were certain religious festivals which belonged exclusively to women. They went also, as we have seen, to weddings, as well as to funerals and to various festivities and ceremonies connected therewith.

In the house itself they had their work, often their music, their children, and it must not be forgotten, a number of female slaves, who were mentally quite as cultivated as themselves. What Pasiclea might be like when at home we can discern from illustrations such as those here reproduced. The



FIG. 45. — Women at home.

lady seated on the left is working on a frame, the lady on the right is using unguents.

Only too frequently the women — though not, of course, our good Pasiclea — were given to peeping out of the door or the upstairs window into the street. Says a chorus of women in Aristophanes: "You were always calling us the very mischief. If we are the mischief, why do you marry us? And why do you forbid us to leave the house or to be caught peeping out? And if the wifey goes out anywhere, and you find her not at home, you get mad as mad can be. And if we take a peep out of window, you try to get a look at the mischief. And if

she is abashed and draws back, you are all the more eager to see the mischief taking another peep!"

Nor let it be forgotten that, though legally and by custom subordinate, the woman had ways of her own of reversing the position. There were plenty of men who from uxoriousness or weakness of character, or because they had married money or a vixen, were "ruled by the slipper." Perhaps it was in joke that Themistocles declared that his child ruled Greece: "For Athens rules Greece, and I rule Athens, and my wife rules me, and the child rules her." On the other hand, the scolding Xanthippe, the wife of Socrates, was by no means a joke. A speech of a plain old squireen in Aristophanes is worth reciting: "I wish to goodness the matchmaker had come to a miserable end, who induced me to marry your mother. For I thoroughly enjoyed my rustic life, untidy in the rough, free-and-easy, all among the bees and sheep and olive-cakes. But then I married the niece of Megacles the son of Megacles — a countryman like me, marrying a city madam, a haughty pampered Lady Vere de Vere! . . . And afterwards, when this son was born to me and this good wife of mine, then we began to wrangle and abuse one another about his name. She wanted to tack *hippos* to it — Xanthippos or Chairhippos or Callippides, — while I was for giving him my grandfather's name, Pheidonides. So for awhile we quarrelled, but at last came to an agreement and called him Pheidippides" — which is very much as if she wanted to call him Marmaduke, while he preferred Hodge, and they compromised with Hodgaduke.

In a previous chapter we contrived so to dress our Athenian

male citizen that his appearance became, we may hope, tolerably clear. One may shrink from attempting the same task with Pasiclea. After studying all the obtainable descriptions and examining all the obtainable pictures and diagrams, we may have learned to know very well how the various dresses and arrangements of dresses look and ought to look, but in several of the more complicated instances we may still be somewhat confused as to exactly how they were put on.

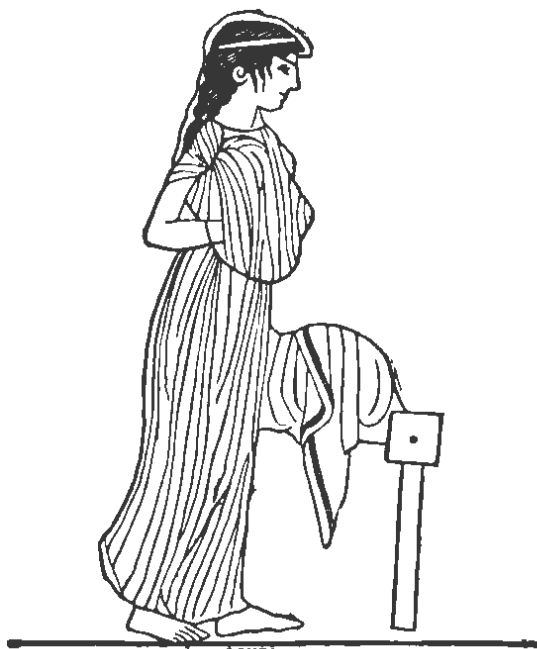


FIG. 46. — Putting on the tunic.

It is perhaps best, therefore, to content ourselves with giving a general description and offering such illustrations as seem most helpful. A member of the sex concerned will perhaps see at a glance how the thing was done, while the male reader will probably care only for the result.

~~As with the men,~~ the female attire consisted ordinarily of two chief portions, the light under-dress and the heavier

mantle or shawl, both of them properly bearing the same Greek names as those of the men. With the women, however, there was naturally more variety of shape or make, and various other names, not too precisely understood, are applied in virtue of difference of details. What in the case of the man is the tunic, is in the case of the women both longer and fuller. The girdle also was wider and more important. The tunic may be sleeved or sleeveless, and its sleeves may be

close or bell-shaped. It is commonly fastened with a brooch or pin over the right shoulder and mostly has a double fold over the breast. Decorated with a border, and itself most frequently of saffron colour, it served as the ordinary attire for the house; and very graceful it can look, as some at least



FIG. 47.— Women's tunics.

of the figures in the illustrations may show. Unlike the tunic of the men, it often trailed behind.

For out-of-doors and visiting the upper garment was put on and carefully draped round the body, sometimes even being drawn over the head, if a separate headcover or veil was not employed. For be it remembered that the women, like the men, wore no hat, except in the country, when a large sun-hat was allowed. This upper garment also was more diversified than that of the other sex.

In respect of material we find not only woollen, cotton, and ordinary linen, but also a fine kind of material of which the exact nature is not known, but which could apparently be made diaphanous and suggests muslin. Towards the end of our period manufactured silk is finding its way into Athenian households. In respect of colours, we find in



FIG. 48. — Doric girl's dress.

particular saffron, purple, apple-green, olive-green, grey-blue, golden-brown, and white.

And here, in order to show that in matter of dress and its interest the eternal feminine was the same in ancient Greece as in modern Everywhere, we may cull a passage, from a poetical genre-sketch by Theocritus. In view of what we have learned concerning the restrictions upon Athenian women, it must indeed be premised that the scene is at Alexandria, where women doubt-

less enjoyed more freedom than at Athens, and also that it was written there some two generations later than our period. Nevertheless, in general, it would serve for a fairly vivid picture of Athenian *bourgeois* life on a day of festival. Gorgo calls upon Praxinoë on the feast of Adonis. An infant, Zopyrion, and Eunoe, the maid, are present. The conversation proceeds thus: —

Gor. Is Praxinoë in?

Prax. My dear Gorgo! At last! Yes, in. It's a wonder you come at all. Look for a chair for her, Eunoe. And put a cushion in it.

Gor. Thanks; don't trouble.

Prax. Sit down.

Gor. The foolishness of me! I have hardly got to you alive, for the crowd and the four-in-hands. Boots and swaggering soldiers everywhere! And the journey is interminable! My dear woman, you live quite too far afield.

Prax. Yes, that insane creature came to the ends of the earth and bought a hole, not a house to live in, just to stop us from being neighbours; out of spite, the jealous wretch — always his way.

Gor. Don't speak of your husband like that, my dear, before the little one. My good woman, see how he is looking at you! Never mind, Zopyrion, sweet child; she doesn't mean daddy!

Prax. The bairn is taking notice, I declare.

Gor. Nice daddy!

Prax. Yes, and the other day that daddy was to buy soda and rouge from the market, and came back with salt — for all he's a man twenty feet high!

Gor. My man Diocleides is just the same — throws money away! Yesterday he bought five fleeces — seven shillings for dog's hair, pickings from old bags, nothing but dirt, endless work! But come, get your gown and shawl.

Prax. Eunoe . . . move yourself! Be quick with some water! . . . You silly thing! why are you wetting my dress? That will do! Please heaven, I have had some sort of a wash. Where is the key of the big chest? Bring it here.

Gor. Praxinoe, that full gown is very becoming. Tell me, how much did it come to, before it was off the loom?

Prax. Don't mention it, Gorgo. More than eight guineas, good money down! And then I worked myself to death over it.

Gor. Well, it has turned out a success.

Prax. It is kind of you to say so . . .

Bring me my shawl, and put my sun-hat on properly . . .

I shan't take you, child. Bogey-man! Horse bites! Cry as much as you like; we must not have you crippled. Let us be going. Phrygia, take the little one and play. Call the dog inside. Shut the front door.

The hair of the Grecian women was generally long and rich, and infinite pains were spent on dressing it with taste and elegance. According to the Athenian ideal it should be wavy, display not too much forehead, and should be either blue-black or golden. Golden, being the rarer colour, was one much affected by those ladies who systematically improved upon nature. The fashion of dressing the hair was subject to much variation, but even at one and the same date the Athenian woman sought no monotonous uniformity. They were satisfied if the result was graceful and becoming. When

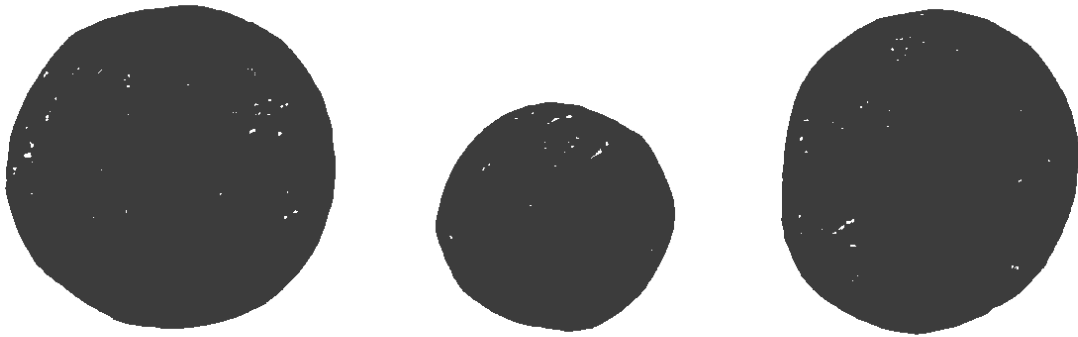


FIG. 49. — Women's hair (ideal); from coins.

the hair had been drawn in graceful curves into a knot or ball at the back of the head, it was sometimes kept in place by a net of threadwork — gold thread by preference; sometimes a strip or band of coloured material was wound artistically round it; on less showy occasions it is to be seen depicted as enclosed in a complete bag or bladder. Combs and pins were also used, and, in fullest dress, a golden or gilded coronal or frontlet stood up in the same place on which ladies now wear a tiara. Perhaps a far clearer notion will be formed at once from a glance at a few illustrations than could be derived from any amount of description.

The footwear of women consisted of sandals, of white

slippers which would fit either foot, of easy yellow shoes, and occasionally of soft high boots. Fans of peacocks' feathers or simply of light wood, and a parasol for out-of-doors, are other articles of equipment.

For ornaments, both of girls and matrons, there were worn gold earrings (spirals or with drops), gold necklets, gold bracelets on the upper arm (mostly shaped like snakes), rings, and frequently gold bands on the ankles. The mother of



FIG. 50. — Woman with fan.

Alcibiades, we are told, wore "perhaps £500 worth," if we may venture once more to modernise the value of money.

And here, perhaps, we ought in chivalry to stop. But our duty is to be historical first and chivalrous afterwards, and we are therefore bound to add that many Athenian women adopted every known device for improving Nature's handiwork. When they were too short, they of course wore high cork soles to their shoes. The Athenians did not believe in wasp-like waists, but, if their figure was distinctly not perfection, they

did not shrink from padding or from physical compression. They not only anointed their hair — as every one was supposed to do — but they dyed it, and wore false additions. They were liberal with rouge, vegetable dyes, white-lead, and other prepa-

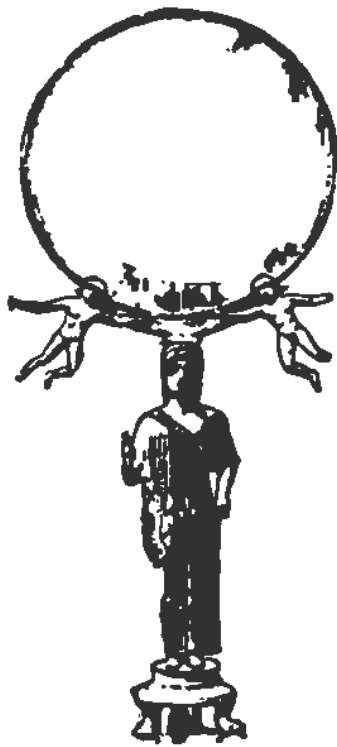


FIG. 61. — Greek mirror.

arations. They rubbed lampblack or sulphuret of antimony under their eyes and on the eyebrows. Xenophon has a rather Sandford-and-Merton little treatise on model housekeeping, and in this the somewhat pedantic and priggish husband warns his wife that perspiration or tears will betray her, and he asks what she would think of *him* if *he* came in be-rouged. As if, forsooth, she was chiefly considering him! More effective is the comic poet, who thus remonstrates with one lady when she overdoes the thing: "If you go out in summer, from your eyes there run two streaks of black; from

your cheeks perspiration makes a red furrow down to your neck; and when your hair touches your face it gets white with white-lead." Beyond this, perhaps, we must not pry. Moreover, our good Pasiclea has little to do with such things.