



*Putting on a crinoline was a major operation; going anywhere in it, as for example through a turnpike gate, was another.*

of the petticoat, which suddenly expanded to its original size, but when her sisters had followed her there was no room for the Major' (or indeed anyone else).

Crinolines also lifted slightly when the wearer bent – when leaning to strike a croquet ball, for instance – offering an electrifying glimpse of frilly leggings to any man wise enough to say, 'After you.' When strained, crinolines had a dismaying tendency to invert and fly upwards, like a stressed umbrella. Stories abounded of women left trapped and staggering inside misbehaving hoops. Lady Eleanor Stanley recorded in her diary how the Duchess of Manchester tripped going over a stile – why she decided to attempt to negotiate a stile in a hoopskirt is a separate imponderable – and ended up exposing her tartan knickerbockers 'to the view of all the world in general and the Duc de Malakoff in particular'. High winds were a special source of disorder, and stairs a positive danger. The greatest risk of all, however, was fire. 'Many wearers of crinolines were burnt to death by inadvertently approaching a fire,' C. Willett and Phillis Cunningham note in their unexpectedly solemn *History of Underclothes*. One manufacturer advertised proudly, if unnervingly, that its crinolines 'do not cause accidents, do not appear at inquests'.



The golden age of crinolines was 1857–66, by which point they were largely being abandoned, not because they were dangerous and preposterous, but because they were increasingly being worn by the lower orders, destroying their exclusivity. 'Your lady's maid must now have her crinoline,' tutted one magazine, 'and it has even become essential to factory girls.' The danger of crinolines among the grinding cogs and whirring belts of factory machinery is easy enough to imagine.

The abandonment of crinolines didn't mean that the age of pointless discomfort was at last coming to an end. Far from it, for crinolines gave way to corsets, and corsets became the most punishing form of apparel in centuries. A few authorities found this strangely heartening, on the apparent grounds that it somehow denoted sacrifice and chastity. The *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine*, the Beeton's popular periodical, approvingly noted in 1866 how the boarders at one girls' school were strapped into their corsets on a Monday morning and left constrained until Saturday, when they were allowed to ease the stays for an hour 'for purposes of ablution'. Such a regime, the magazine noted, allowed the average girl to reduce her waist size from twenty-three inches to thirteen in just two years.

The quest to reduce circumference at almost any cost to comfort was real enough, but the enduring belief that some women had ribs surgically removed to make their midsections even more compressible is, happily, a myth. Valerie Steele,