CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The "Demise" of Black Satin

We felt a fatal presentiment that the shop was doomed—and so it was.

—Sketches by Boz

The black satin that Marie wore at her trial and execution had caught the eye of the public. Yet it was characteristic and respectable dress for a woman who had been a lady's maid to the nobility and looked back upon her genteel station in life. The English fashion historian C. Willett Cunnington observes that "all through the Victorian era the 'black silk dress' was regarded as an invaluable standby, denoting respectability without undue pride, and was much used, therefore, on ceremonious occasions, in the presence of 'our betters', or death, or similar superior forces." Marie had worn her black satin in the presence of the Duchess of Sutherland (in fact, Donald Nicoll was told that the dress was given her by a member of the Sutherland family); and it suited her well when she faced the superior forces of the law, and when she confronted death as it came to her in the person of Mr. Calcraft on the roof of Horsemonger Lane Gaol.

In light of contemporary fashions it would seem, then, that Marie's dress was entirely appropriate, but we are nonetheless told that the public, in revulsion from the Bermondsey Horror, immediately stopped wearing black satin dresses after the execution. The late nineteenth century crime writers who have briefly described the Manning case usually pass along that intriguing fashion note. Donald Nicoll, who, it will be remembered, was sheriff of London and Middlesex at the time of the trial, may be the only one of these authors who had
firsthand knowledge of the case. He recalled: "After this it was useless for linendrapers to advertise black satins to be sold at even half their cost, as the material remained upon their shelves till Mrs. Manning was forgotten." An article in a series entitled "Celebrated Crimes and Criminals" first published in the Sporting Times and later (in 1890) as a book made the following comment on Marie's hanging: "Mrs. Manning, who was most scrupulously attired, wore a black satin dress on this eventful occasion, a fact which brought this costly material into an unpopularity which lasted for many years afterwards." Major Arthur Griffiths, in his Mysteries of Police and Crime (1898), recites the tradition as hearsay: "Mrs. Manning wore a black satin gown on the scaffold—a circumstance that caused a strong prejudice to be held against that material, which is said to have remained out of fashion in consequence till quite recent years." In Studies in Black and Red (1896), Joseph Forster, who hated Mrs. Manning with a passion, remarked sarcastically that he hoped the black satin dress she wore at her hanging "was some slight comfort to her," and added that "in consequence black satin went out of fashion for a considerable period, the trade in that fabric being correspondingly injured." By the time we reach the twentieth century, Mrs. Manning's effect on the satin trade is blown up into an economic disaster of the first magnitude. Charles Kingston writes that "this last appearance of Maria Manning had disastrous consequences for the trade in that material. For many years afterwards no woman would think of wearing black satin, which had become such a startling reminder of a most horrible crime, and consequently thousands of persons were thrown out of work, and numerous small traders went bankrupt." Bernard O'Donnell wrote in 1951 that black satin went out of fashion for nearly thirty years after the Manning execution.

If it were only the crime writers who had handed down this obituary of black satin, we might be inclined to reject it outright as part of the romance that clings to an interesting murderess. But caution must be taken against undue skepticism because the essential truth of the tradition is accepted by the fashion historians. Wilfred Mark Webb, writing in The Heritage of Dress,
not only asserts as fact that black satin went out of fashion after Mrs. Manning's hanging but gives other examples of fashion changes induced by executions. He informs us that the wearing of nightgowns in the street was stopped by a woman being executed in her bedgown, and that "the use of yellow starch had its death-blow when the hangman appeared in orange collar and cuffs." Having little faith in the independence of the judiciary at least in matters of fashion, Webb also claims that a judge has been known to plot the destruction of a style people wanted suppressed "by ordering the hangman who officiated to deck himself in the objectionable garment." He concludes by passing judgment on the unfortunate black satin: "Now, however, as there are no public executions, there is not this opportunity of getting rid of obnoxious styles, and society ought to look about for another means to repress them." C. Willett Cunnington, in the introduction to his important survey English Women's Clothing in the Nineteenth Century (1937), comments with more restraint: "All through the century black with a lustre surface (such as satin) was fashionable for visiting or evening toilette, except for a few years after the execution of the murderess Mrs. Manning, who was hanged in black satin."

None of these writers cites contemporary evidence for the rejection of black satin after 1849, and it is therefore appropriate to take a look now at available Victorian sources of fashion information. After all, black satin was not only a staple in the everyday wardrobe but one of the principal fabrics for mourning dress, and it would seem harder to kill off than the eccentric habit of promenading in nightgowns.

A prime reference source is the fashion magazines of the period. A review of the monthly columns on "London Fashions" in The Ladies' Cabinet of Fashion Music and Romance for the period from January 1850 through March 1852 indicates nothing to support the tradition of the immediate baleful effect of Mrs. Manning's famous dress. In December 1849 Queen Dowager Adelaide, the widow of William IV, died and Queen Victoria ordered a period of national mourning. In its London Fashions column for January 1850, Ladies' Cabinet stated that the death of the Queen Dowager had "cast a temporary gloom over
the fashionable world,” which was now in half mourning. For promenade dress velvets and satins were reported to be most in vogue, and “robes of black velvet or of black satin are the most fashionable.” In February the same column reported that “black satin, or dark colours, are much worn for half dress.” No black satin fashions are noted in most of the following winter, but in April 1851, as spring approached, “we also see many redingotes of black satin, the corsage with basques, trimmed with ribbon, or with narrow lace frilled.” In March 1852 it is announced that “redingotes of black satin are much in favour, ornamented with passementerie in jet.”

Another London fashion magazine of the same period, The London and Paris Ladies’ Magazine of Fashion Polite Literature, Etc., also continued to comment on black satins. In January 1850, during the period of half mourning for the Queen Dowager, the Ladies’ Magazine pictured as a walking dress a “redingote of black satin; the corsage is open, with revers of sable fur.” In March, as one of its dinner dresses, a robe of black satin was shown, with a low body and chemisette of cambric and a casaweck (short quilted outdoor mantle) of pink taffeta. Black satin was also featured in the following winter of 1850-51. The November issue shows a walking dress that is a “robe of black satin with a mantelet of velvet,” and in December the large plate of fashion engravings shows a style that Mrs. Manning herself might have worn: “Robe of black satin, with five flounces of black lace headed by ruches; the body is quite plain; pardessus of the same, trimmed round the bottom with three rows of lace, and finished round the neck and front by several rows of narrow lace.” Marie might even have fancied the pink silk capote (bonnet) that the mannequin wears, because she often liked to relieve her basic black with colorful accessories. Another carriage dress of black satin was shown in the January 1851 issue, where the blackness of the dress fabric is again reinforced by black ornamentation, this time in lace and velvet. Other black satin dresses appeared in October and November 1851.

Ladies’ Magazine, like the other English fashion periodicals, reported current trends from Paris, and it is likely that modish
Englishwomen, in planning fabric purchases, looked more often at Paris styles than at the local gallows. The report of the “French correspondent” of the *Ladies’ Magazine* indicates a possible reason for the decline in black satin purchases (if it did occur) that is more prosaic and plausible than Mrs. Manning’s hanging—it was coming to be replaced to some extent by velvet, which “now forms, according to present ideas, a toilette for useful simple wear, as formerly levantine and satin were used.” Certainly the magazine found no flagging of the popular favor in which the color black was held. On the contrary, the “French correspondent” reported in October 1851 that “black has become an indispensable part of a lady’s toilette; it is not as formerly reserved for mourning.”

Neither of these fashion journals made any mention of Mrs. Manning’s dress. It should not be supposed that this silence can be attributed to squeamishness or to the feeling that acknowledgment of an acquaintance with a lurid murder case would be unladylike. The interest in the Mannings and other murders and executions was by no means limited to the Victorian male. Indeed, the December 1849 issue of *Ladies’ Magazine* ran the following advertisement announcing the addition of the Mannings to the Chamber of Horrors at Madame Tussaud’s.

Maria Manning, George Manning,
and
Bloomfield Rush,
Taken from Life at the Trials; a Cast in Plaster of
Mr. O’Connor,
with plan of the kitchen where he was murdered:
Models of Stanfield Hall,
The Seat of the late T. Jermy, Esq., and Potash Farm, the Residence
of the Assassin, are now added to the Chamber of Horrors, at
Madame Tussaud & Sons’ Exhibition,
Bazaar, Baker Street, Portman Square.
Open from 11 in the Morning till 10 at Night.
Admittance, Large Room, 1s.—Small Room, 6d.
“This is one of the best Exhibitions in the metropolis.”—*The Times.*

The advertisement was still running in January and March 1851. *Ladies’ Cabinet* ignored the Mannings but had other crime tidbits for its readers, including articles on the beheading of Charles I and executions in Canton.
An analysis of the advertisements of the silk mercers in the *Illustrated London News*, a weekly, from late 1849 to the end of 1851, does not show any radical shift in offerings or pricing of black satins. The three principal shops that advertised were King and Co. of Regent Street, its former partner, W. W. Sheath, and Beech & Berrall of Edgeware Road, a more economy-minded operation that sold a large amount of merchandise acquired in special purchases. Since black satins, apart from their use for mourning dress, were worn primarily in the winter, the advertisements for the material appear most heavily in the fall and winter months with closeout sales in the spring. In October and November 1849, the months of the Mannings’ trial and executions, black satins were advertised by all three firms. Then on December 8, following the death of Queen Dowager Adelaide, both King and Sheath placed a number of advertisements for black fabrics, including black satins ranging from thirty-six shillings the full dress to three guineas for the richest quality. On 15 December John George, a competitor who was in the course of a going-out-of-business sale, announced a further reduction in the price of his colored silks because the royal mourning period required black.

In the course of 1850 Beech & Berrall placed at least twenty-five advertisements for black satins, with clearance sales on winter fabrics including black satins continuing well into the summer. King placed eleven weekly ads for Mrs. Manning’s favorite fabric and only rarely offered a price reduction to its more affluent trade. Sheath, whose advertisements were less frequent and without great detail, listed black satin twice in early 1850.

Fabric advertisements are less common in 1851, but in the first six months King advertised black satin seven times and Beech & Berrall five times. Only one advertisement might lend some credence to the possibility that there was distress trading in the material. In a notice of a twenty-day sale of special-purchase merchandise in February and March, Beech & Berrall announced that the stock included five thousand yards of the richest black satins and added that this was “a most important portion of the stock inasmuch as good Black Satin is not
influenced by fashion, but like current coin, always treasured
with a feeling of security.” The advertising copywriter may
either have been trying to ward off the curse of Mrs. Manning
or merely explaining a badly balanced sale inventory. In any
event, King at the same time was offering black satin at its 1850
price range, twenty-one shillings, sixpence to three guineas the
full dress.

The Great Crystal Palace Exhibition was held in 1851, less
than two years after the Manning execution. The list of prize
medals awarded at the exhibition for silk and velvet shows that
seven manufacturers won awards for black satins, among them
one British firm and others from Europe (which dominated the
satin trade), including exhibitors from France, Switzerland, and
Austria. The ghost of Mrs. Manning had not frightened these
manufacturers from the hall or blurred the vision of the award
committee.

In light of this evidence, admittedly scattered, that black satin
had not vanished completely from the London fashion scene,
what can we make of the traditions attaching to Mrs. Manning’s
dress and its powerful influence? When the “murder mania” of
early and mid-Victorian England is considered, it seems at least
as likely that the dress of a famous murderess would inspire a
fashion as destroy it. Certainly Punch thought so and counted
on Mrs. Manning to be a trendsetter. In a satirical letter entitled
“Old Bailey Ladies” published immediately after the trial, a
young woman writes a friend her enthusiastic fashion notes
from the courtroom: “MRS. MANNING was very nicely dressed,
indeed. When I looked at her, I thought the jury must find such
a black satin gown not guilty—but they didn’t. Besides the black
satin, she had a plaid shawl of the Stuart pattern. Wore a very
beautiful cap, that I have no doubt will be fashionable.” There is
at least one authenticated example of a new style being set by a
Victorian murder. Franz Müller robbed and murdered an
elderly man named Briggs on a train and inadvertently ex­
changed hats with his victim. The clinching evidence against
Müller was the identification of the victim’s hat, whose crown
the murderer had cut down an inch and a half so as to remove
the portion on which the hatter had written Briggs’s name; the
oddly proportioned hat gave rise to a new style in men’s headgear—a hat shaped like a topper but reduced to half the ordinary height—the so-called “Muller-cut-down.”

There seems at least one safe conclusion about the role of Mrs. Manning in fashion history—that, to borrow a phrase from Mark Twain, the reports of the death of black satin have been greatly exaggerated.