

Dances of To-day



The Modern Dance

Dances of To-Day

CHAPTER I

THE MODERN DANCE

WITH the innate human demand for "something new" it is strange that social dancing was permitted for so many years to stick in the rut of Waltz and Two-Step. Probably it was because the craving for new dances took no active form.

"On with the dance; let joy be unconfined." The line was a hollow mockery as applied to many a ballroom. Their feet confined within the limits of Waltz and Two-Step, the young people danced; their elders merely looked on.

And when it is remembered that the boundary line betwixt youth and age was forty, and that any one who was evidently on the far side of the boundary brought ridicule upon his or her head by appearing upon the floor, it is not difficult to

picture the proportion of "wall-flowers" at these formal gatherings.

Naturally the matrons played the rôle with better grace, bored though they were by continual waltz and two-step music. But the old men—of forty and beyond—well, many claimed they were literally driven to drink. And sometimes after they saw the buffet the ballroom saw them no more.

Ancient history, you say? Not at all; 'tis a picture of social dancing only a few seasons ago.

The craving to put Monsieur Waltz and Madame Two-Step into back seats—or, let us say, to make them "wall-flowers"—took active form.

The change came, a rejuvenation, the dance was reborn. And youth was reborn in the hearts and bodies and minds of men and women of all ages, and the transformation wrought is marvelous—in nothing so much as in the near elimination of non-dancers.

The dance seemed like some strange creature which had been shut in the dark for so long, and had thrown itself about in curious contortions to make certain of its freedom.

Grotesque, abnormal, inartistic, it must be admitted that they were in original shape, many of

these dances. The new freedom as applied to dancing—the breaking away from the ties of the Waltz and Two-Step—with the medley of tunes introduced as accompaniment, was responsible for a superabundance of contortion. With "Everybody Doing It" to prejudiced observers (especially those who never saw what they criticized) it seemed that everybody was *overdoing* it.

With the best teachers and their patrons as safety-valves, as it were, sanity and decency have prevailed along with the innovations; and it is evident that a strong tide has set in toward the artistic and graceful as against the freakish and bizarre.

Attacks upon some of the new dances have been facilitated by the rapid means of collecting and distributing the news of the day. In view of that difference the turmoil is no greater than that while the easy-going world of more than a century ago was engaged in debate upon the Waltz as successor to the Minuet.

That eternal desire for something new has been given expression by Thomas Haynes Bayly, an Englishman, in words that seem as if they might have been written three years ago instead of early in the last century:

"O give me new figures! I can't go on dancing
The same that were taught me ten seasons ago;
The schoolmaster over the land is advancing,
Then why is the master of dancing so slow?
It is such a bore to be always caught tripping
In dull uniformity year after year;
Invent something new and you'll set me a-skiping;
I want a new figure to dance with my Dear!"

The introduction of the Waltz brought forth general criticism, a storm of protests, first in Great Britain, then in the United States. Even Lord Byron—for a censor of morals he might be regarded as a man in a glass house—professed to be shocked. In the Minuet the dancers are at arms' length; in the Waltz in closer proximity. That was the chief objection.

But, as the present more wide-spread protests—which may flash by cable where the others went by slow packet—it became evident that the foundation for objection was not with the dance as properly performed but with those dancers who made it the basis for vulgarity.

Gradually the frowning upon the Waltz grew less, until its opponents were only those who protested against any kind of dancing. One of the most ardent lookers-on was Lord Byron, who could not dance because of his lameness.

Narrow views ignore the fact that dancing is

an elemental art, as old as human nature itself; a physical expression of joy that has been an inspiring factor in the mental and spiritual life of nations since primitive times.

"She danced for joy" is a phrase that, on the contrary, ingenuously conveys recognition of just what the stern moralists would deny. Doubtless such a dancer never has had a lesson—a little girl, for instance, delighted at receiving a big doll. Stern indeed must be the morality that would argue her steps were prompted by evil.

Or maybe a group of youngsters join in impromptu steps to the discord of an old hurdy-gurdy, dancing instinctively. How would it be possible to avoid such public demonstrations of the innate fascination of the dance save by having the grinder dispense only discord that would scare the little ones away?

Presumably a quest as to the beginning of this love for dancing would lead to the Garden of Eden; and may it not be that Eve danced because she saw so many of the things of Nature dancing, each in its own fashion? The water dances over the rocks; the tall grass dances in the meadow; the leaves dance in the trees, and, over all, the moonbeams, or the sunlight, dance.

To mention the fact that dumb animals instinctively dance may be treading upon dangerous ground. First, it suggests the Darwinian theory as applicable to the origin of dancing; second, it calls attention to the rather odd assortment of dance names redolent of the barn-yard and elsewhere.

Imitation is a human quality as elemental as dancing, and it is by no means unnatural that the quest for something new led in the direction indicated; but it does seem a bit unfortunate that such ludicrous names were given to what are, in amended form at any rate, harmless dances.

Latter day emulation in the dance of the movements of dumb animals may be said to have a firm foothold in history. The ancient Greeks, for instance, had the "Khorovod" in imitation of the flying of the crane; the French several centuries ago danced "La Branle," based on nothing more artistic than the kick of the cow; an old Scotch dance had movements depicting the leaping salmon.

How efficient in beauty the latter may have been there is nothing left to show, but the "Khorovod," like all of the Greek dances, had its basis in art. "Sculpture in motion," the Germans aptly call the

dance, suggested undoubtedly by those three hundred beautiful Greek movements that have come down to us through the ages recorded on vases and other bits of ancient handiwork.

Every pose in a Greek dance expressed an emotion, and the Greek artistic sense limited itself to beautiful emotions. Dancing was the physical expression of music. Thus it is interpreted by the æsthetic dancers of to-day; and the tendency is becoming more apparent in social dancing.