

How Automobiles Are Making Us All Dancers



Narrow escapes like that shown above are supposed to be a curse to pedestrians, but psychology assures us that they are really a blessing in disguise. Note how the woman, in her eagerness to escape the onrushing automobile has unconsciously struck a pose quite like that of the classical dancer in the photograph below. If she escapes with her life after years of dodging cars, Professor Shaw thinks she will be not only quicker witted but will have the grace and suppleness of muscle that make a great dancer

Below, the whirlwind leap of a modern dancer which easily may get its inspiration from the speed of our automobiles and the swiftness pedestrians have to develop to escape death under their wheels



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THE automobile is doing its first century; already it has been responsible for countless changes in our national life. The car came into existence at a time when business was dull and labor low. By creating a new set of wants it made men move and business hum.

The range of the auto is almost limitless. One person in every little group has one. Everybody talks about motoring just as almost every modern house has a garage as well as a kitchen. Indeed, the auto has brought about more changes than the war, has cost more, and threatens to be almost as deadly.

These changes are not all of a physical nature; they affect the mind as well as the body. Cars put us in different places and in different frames of mind. Just how are motoring and dancing connected? Before we can answer that question we must measure the general effects of the auto upon our minds.

The psychological changes wrought by the Ford are not so wide and vivid as the physical ones, but they are none the less real. Men and women have learned to live out of doors, to see more of life and to breathe more deeply. Our grandfathers were content to take a little trip now and then, once a year perhaps; but grandpa's children are doing that sort of thing weekly. As a result, the range of life has been extended by the addition of new views and new acquaintances.

The automobile makers are getting us away from Main Street and giving us some of the world at large. They are the nation's dancing masters.

All of the people walk some of the time and some of the people walk all of the time. It is among pedestrians that

the great change of step has taken place. The auto makes us step lively, so that we pirouette our way along the sidewalks and across the streets. The car has put the spirit of Terpsichore into our slow, heavy steps and made dancers of us all.

The horse had to grow accustomed to the car, and he did so with little trouble. The result is that a horse who shies at an auto is a great rarity. In like manner, we human beings who walk had to change our mental habits and our steps to make room for the omnipresent car which has taught us the quick thinking of the boxer and baseball player, the quick stepping of the professional dancer.

Nearly a century ago Balzac observed that there was a difference in gait between country folks and city people. The provincials in France forged ahead with a heavy tread wholly different from the neat, mincing gait of the city-bred person. This difference was attributed to the fact that, in the country, one moves along without any fear of the interruption which comes in the city, where there are other people to share the sidewalk and carriages to dispute the crossings.

Country people moved on expecting nothing, and thus caring nothing how they walked. City people had to have sharp eyes, alert brains and quick steps in order to prepare for emergencies. The difference in mental attitude appeared at once as a difference of step.

This general principle now appears in an extraordinary manner in both country and city; now all people tend to tango. When cities were small and thinly populated there was less danger of running into a fellow walker. When

Why Psychology Thinks That Dodging In and Out of the Motor Traffic Is Adding to Our Agility and Grace, and Increasing Our Power to Think Quickly

traffic was light and the horse set the pace there was little fear of one's life at the street crossing. But all this has been changed.

The slow-moving vehicle keeps to the curb; the pedestrian clings to the walk until the time comes for him to make the crossing. The effect of this social situation is felt all the way down to our toes. We have learned to walk differently. We start and stop instantly. We change our gait and direction in the fraction of a second. We demand rubber heels and take delight in the dance. Something has put us on our toes and made us dance.

The automobile is the cause of the new step. The car came in just before the modern dance and has taught us to tango. Autos themselves are guided by traffic policemen who raise their warning hands or flash out the signs "Go-Go!" "Stop-Stop!" The whole affair is mechanical and prosaic.

Not so with the pedestrian. He must have an alert eye to detect the coming of the onrushing car from east to west, up-town or down. His ear must catch the whirr of the motor before the sounding of the belated horn. In a word, the pedestrian in the age of motors must have new eyes and new ears.

Along with these sense improvements, the pedestrian is required to have and possess a nervous system which is capable of translating what he sees and hears into what he must do. This nervous system of his must be on the qui vive to stop and start the muscular machinery, to alter direction and speed. All of these psychological factors promote the dancing step.

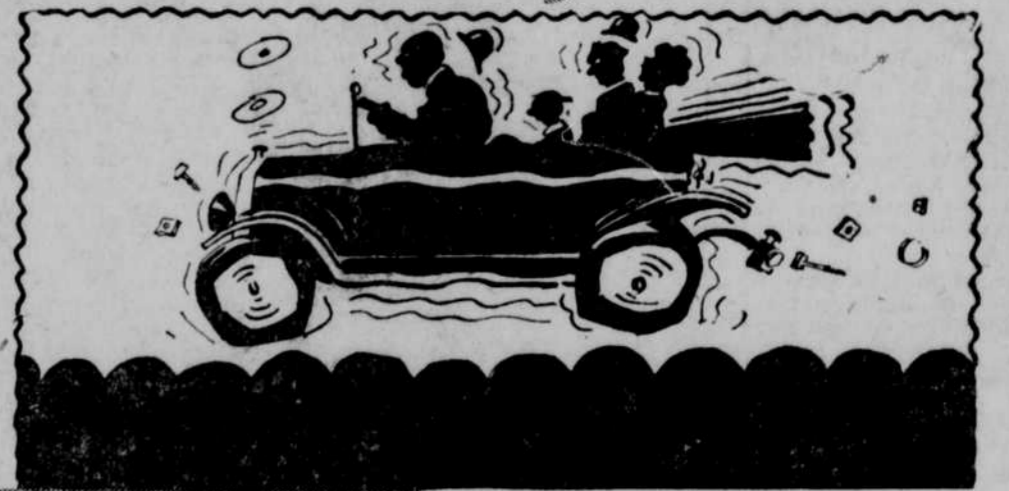
Let any one stand on a busy corner and observe what goes on in the nervous system of the pedestrian and he will awaken to the fact that we have become a nation of dancers, with Henry Ford and the rest of the automobile makers as the great teachers of the terpsichorean art.

Men do not saunter along with eyes one way and feet another, but conduct themselves as a dancer on the floor or a boxer with his shadow sparring. Women, who can no longer wear the long

skirts and trains of the pre-automobile age, find it possible and agreeable to express the dancing step peculiar to the sex. Both women and men are now alive to the situation which the car has produced, alive to the tips of their toes.

In addition to the physical change in the national step, the auto has caused psychological alterations just about as marked. The most significant among such changes is the new co-ordination between nerve and muscle, between organ of sense and organ of action.

We have always been in possession of these elements, as the eyes which see and the legs which move, but the readjustment of these separate processes, sensory and motor, is something of recent origin. It dates back to the beginnings of the horseless carriage and has advanced step by step with the improvement of the car. The rapid and more perfect co-ordination of the faculties which perceive and those which act connects itself



The "shimmy" was invented before we had as many thousands of miles of smooth highways as we have now. Can it be, as the above little sketch suggests, that it was inspired by a trip in a none too easy riding car over a bumpy pavement?

It was a wonder that the coming of the auto into the social life of man did not cause an increase in human nervousness. There is enough national neurasthenia, but it seems impossible to attribute any of this increase to the lively situation caused by fear of the car at the crossing.

There may be increased nervousness among those who drive the car, but this is not the case with the pedestrians who meet it at the crossing. Instead of giving way to panic and shattered nerves, the pedestrians who had to adjust their steps to the car found it possible to do this by adopting the dancing step and the dancing state of mind. Indeed, the whole mental life of man may be said to have become lighter because of the rapid changes which were taking place in his consciousness.

We may not live as gracefully and nobly as did the women and men of the '80s and '90s, but we live more easily and with less of gloom and melancholy. Our blood has been stirred, our nerves tuned up and our eyes cleared by the motor life of the age.

It is a significant fact that the auto and the modern dance came into man's life at about the same time. There may have been no connection between the two, no reason why we should turn from dodging autos to dancing in a restaurant, but still there is a kind of understanding between the garage and the ball-room.

The dance itself took on an informal character which makes it look like a kind of walk or stroll. No longer is it the formal dance of the Victorian period; it is something which suggests the semi-aesthetic movement of a person crossing an auto-ridden street. Furthermore, there is a kind of likeness between the jazz of the dance and the strident horn of the auto.

In either case, whether we are on the street or the dance floor, we have learned to adopt a step which will get us through safely. We must dance in our walk or die in the tracks of the truck.

In thus increasing the amount of motion in the world the automobile has made us a more active race of women and men. Then it has added to the grace of life, so far as bodily movement is concerned.

This is not the greatest possible gain for us, since it does not mean an increase of national intelligence, but intelligence often depends upon action, so that the increase and perfection of movement may result in similar improvements in the brain.

On the mental side, the auto which we must avoid has increased brain power on the side of attention, which is a most important factor in mental life. In learning to look out for the auto we have sharpened our wits generally, so that the car has made us a more alert people mentally and physically.

The American is a creature who can adapt himself to new and ever-changing circumstances. He was at home in the world of slow things; he is making himself at home in the world of motion. This appears in his moving pictures, his airplanes, his rapid transit, his automobile driving and automobile dodging.

As Americans we have still to learn the art of life as it was practiced by the ancient Athenians. We have no Socrates to guide us; we feel that we cannot trust wholly to Ford. But the Ford tendency, which is motion and action, may have the power to show us how to live gracefully in the modern world of force and motion.

If we are, as seems probable, better adapted both mentally and physically to the high speed of the age than we were twenty years ago, a large part of this change for the better in us must be ascribed to the automobile.

How extraordinarily nimble and graceful of muscle and brain we shall become when there are as many motor cars as human beings is something to stagger the imagination.



Side stepping automobiles is recommended as one of the best ways of training for this kind of acrobatic dance

Perhaps when there are four or five automobiles to every inhabitant we shall all be able to stretch ourselves like this



Sir Thomas Lipton in one of the first "horseless carriages," a vehicle that wasn't swift enough to make anybody very nimble of foot or brain