

Progress in the "Closer-to-Nature" Idea



Miss Helen Moller, as Lightly Costumed as the Children in the Scene, appearing as Photographed in an Outdoor Performance of "Orpheus." A Striking Manifestation of the Closer-to-Nature Evolution of Recent Years.

Interesting Facts About the Newest Health Fad---and the Question They Raise About Where the Final "Clothesline" Is to Be Drawn

THE closer-to-nature ideal cherished from different viewpoints in every civilized community seems to be making progress in practical ways. A few years ago such scenes as are photographed from life on this page could have existed only in the wildest imagination. Their existence, in fact, probably would have stirred the police into unwonted activity. To-day these out-of-doors displays of bare feet and limbs, with bodies veiled by only the scantiest flowing draperies, are indulged in and encouraged by women, girls and young children belonging to the best social circles. Dancing upon the green-sward with bodies as lightly covered as was the custom in ancient Greece is a feature of several fashionable schools to which families of the best social standing send their young daughters.

The childhood note is dominant all through this particular manifestation of the closer-to-nature ideal. Nearly all of the women who make it their profession to teach dancing as that art was practiced by care-free youths and maidens in the Golden Age of Greece surround themselves with children. Children hate clothes anyway, and seem to belong to such scenes equally with the trees and the grass. Besides, the natural grace of these joyous young animals doubtless gives valuable points to their instructors. Isadora Duncan, the world's first and chief exponent and teacher of the ancient Greek dances, is rarely seen in public without her background of a score or more of dancing children, her pupils.

Lady Constance Richardson, the English noblewoman who threw down her defiance to aristocratic society when she became a professional dancer of the bare-footed, lightly draped type, publishes the fact that she is bringing up her own children as nearly as possible in conformity with the closer-to-nature ideal. In the seclusion of her garden the little ones run about in pleasant weather very nearly naked. The keynote of her idea is that the sun and the fresh air should come into direct contact with the body, and that the wearing of clothes unnecessarily is a reproach to civilization.

The last few years, too, have shown progress in the degree of emancipation of clothes. As the closer-to-nature cult increases in membership and activity it sheds more and more of its conventional garments and puts on less and less of their classically artistic substitute. The corset was first to go. Bare arms, shoulders and chest were an easy achievement. Shoes gave place to sandals. And when the sandals went stockings went with them. As soon as the average spectator had reconciled himself or herself to the sight of the not-over-revealing bare foot of civilized times, then the flowing Grecian draperies began to grow shorter at the bottom, as they already had at the top. At the present writing bare legs



Miss Elsie Kuehne and Children in an Outdoor "Orpheus" Dance.

in public are no longer the special privilege of innocent childhood; the mature instructor enters the competition with a seat which the faithful camera is incapable of disguising.

Up to the present time a certain personal reserve has been noticed—as indicated in the accompanying photographs. All the persons involved, even the children, affect to conceal their identities. They are not of these times, but of the times when such gambols were a popular custom. They are pretending to be maids and children of two or three thousand years ago, their draperies stirred, not by the breezes of Mt. Kisco, N. Y., but by zephyrs from the classic Aegean Sea, before joy in nature had been disturbed by Plato over problems of the soul.

You see here the Junoesque Miss Helen Moller running over the grass with a group of children, her graceful limbs no less bare than those of her small companions. But it is not really Miss Moller. It is a character in the Greek play, "Orpheus," given in an outdoor theatre at Mt. Kisco. The dancer is clothed in a garment called an illusion, and can therefore feel no embarrassment. The situation is the same in the case of Miss Marie Mann, whose bare right foot is pointing at 2:30 p. m. on an imaginary dial. This is not Miss Mann—it is a character in "Orpheus."

This Brookside open-air theatre at Mt. Kisco is a representative centre for the practise of closer-to-nature ideals. The "best people" are seen in the audience, and the daughters of the best people, won-

drously open-minded as to clothes, may sometimes be seen gamboling there on nature's green stage.

Another institution where nature is having a fair chance is the fashionable girls' school maintained by Mrs. Florence Fleming Noyes, at Petersboro, N. H. Here, too, there are frequent open-air displays of bare limbs in the classic dance—with personalities carefully disguised, as "Faun," "Bacchus," "Bacchantes," and so on.

It should not be forgotten that the world's greatest physical instructors are firm supporters of this shedding of clothes in the open. The famous Lieutenant Mueller of Denmark—who gave health lessons to the Kaiser and to Colonel Roosevelt—maintains that we are being slowly suffocated by our clothes. The skin, he says, must have light and the free circulation of air, along with buoyant exercises.

Dancing, as well as other forms of physical exercise, has the physical accompaniment in a sense of rhythm. This agreement unites the physical instructors and the teachers of classic dancing. On this point Mrs. Noyes, of the Petersboro school, says:

"When we cultivate the sympathetic nervous system through the right use of rhythmic movements we will be capable of great things in creative art, since all the beauty which we feel and to which we respond registers on the brain. No less an authority than G. Stanley Hall, of Clark University, bears me out in this theory, and maintains that the cultivation and appreciation of the beautiful has a



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Miss Mary Wolston, in Her Barefoot "Orpheus" Dance.

very definite scientific value in the development of the brain, and influences its output to an extent little realized in this materialistic age.

"Our aim here is not so much to imitate the Greeks as it is to give the body

perfect freedom of movement and expression. To attempt to express rhythmic emotions in modern fashionable attire would be absurd. Just the moment one throws aside ordinary clothing and puts on this little costume one gets immediately into the atmosphere we want. Not a muscle bound or hampered, not an articulation contracted. It is a matter of laying aside all our stiff-necked Puritanism and forgetting the specifications which wrong training and false ideals have developed in all of us. We must get back to child movements and animal rhythms, to natural gestures and free motion.

And they do—no question about that. But again crops up that bothersome question about drawing the line—the clothesline, so to speak. Mrs. Noyes confesses that the ideal is "perfect" freedom of motion. Even the innocent bystander sometimes has a logical mind, and will ask: "How can you have 'perfection' by leaving off only part of your clothes?" etc., etc.

Reverting to the recognized value of bodily movements that are rhythmic, there exists a scientific "Theory of Eurhythmics," originated by Prof. E. Jaques-Dalcroze, of France, who has made of it the leading principle of an educational system. Of his system he writes:

"The object of the method is, in the first instance, to create by the help of rhythm, a rapid and regular current of communication between brain and body, and what differentiates my physical exercises from those of present day methods of muscular development is that each of them is conceived in the form which can most quickly establish in the brain the image of the movement studied.

"It is a question of eliminating in every muscular movement, by the help of will, the untimely intervention of muscles useless for the movement in question, and thus developing attention, consciousness and will power. Neurasthenia is often nothing less than intellectual confusion produced by the inability of the nervous system to obtain from the muscular system regular obedience to the order from the brain."

Professor Dalcroze also links hands with the closer-to-nature classical dancers, for he remarks: "I like joy, for it is life. I preach joy, for it alone gives the power of creating useful and lasting work."

Out-of-doors bare-foot dancing appears, from the camera reports, to be a joyous proposition. Perhaps there is no occasion to worry about the ultimate no-clothesline. Somebody can usually be trusted to step in at the psychological moment and save the situation—as Mayor Curley of Boston did when he told some perfectly well-meaning bare-foot society dancers: "Go right home and put your stockings on!"



Miss Marie Mann, as She Appeared in a Greek Play Performance at the Outdoor Theatre, Mount Kisco, N. Y.