

DANCING DOWN THE YEARS

Temple To Cabaret

AT the dawn of civilisation man danced. Before he painted, or wrote, or made music to express himself, he danced. Dancing has always been a primitive impulse. It is still a primitive impulse; that is the reason why people danced the "Black Bottom" and "The Charleston" a few years ago. It is the reason why they dance the "Lambeth Walk" and the "Chestnut Tree" in 1939. No doubt few of the people sliding about a modern ballroom clutching one another stop to think why they want to dance. They do not know they are obeying an impulse almost as old as man.

Much of the history of Egypt is to-day preserved in the wall paintings decorating the ancient tombs. The friezes are pictures of Egyptian life centuries ago, and one of the things they tell us is that the Egyptians danced. The origin of dancing is closely linked with the origin of religion. In Egypt the priests led the ceremonial dances, and these dances came to have deep significance. Because the Egyptians were worshippers of the heavenly bodies it was in their country that dances dedicated to the sun were composed.

In Ancient Greece

The Greeks were the greatest dancing nation in the ancient world. Generally, the Greek idea of education was half gymnastics (and dancing) to perfect the body, and half music to make the mind beautiful. Thus it was that much of the everyday life of that great nation was expressed through dancing. One of the most brilliant of their festivals was the Dance of the Spring, dedicated to Dionysius, the God of rebirth and fruitfulness. It was the Greeks who gave the name "Terpsichore" to the muse of the Dance, whom the whole race glorified; even Sappho taught dancing at Lesbos.

The Jews loved dancing, and one may read in the Bible: "And David danced before the Ark of the Lord with all his might. . . ." When Rome's soldiers over-ran Palestine in the last century B.C., however, other influences were introduced into the country. Herod's court was corrupt, and the dancing was licentious.

In China and Japan, as in Greece and Egypt, the dance had its origins in the common life of the people. Chinese and Japanese dances are largely gesture and mime, in which every expression of the face, every twist of the hands, plays its part in telling the story. It is the same in India. In India to-day there are still temple dances, and the art of dancing is closely interwoven with the religious ceremonies of the people, as the Poi Dance was, long ago, with the Maori.



The Middle Ages

In the middle ages the dance was still an expression of the people, but it underwent many changes. In each country there were national dances; there were funeral dances, dances to exorcise devils, dances of courtship and of love. But the conditions of living were poor for most of the people, and even the great mansions of the overlords were, in winter, cold and cheerless places. So nobility and peasantry alike often danced for warmth. For the poor people dancing was often the only way of keeping away the cold on winter nights.

In Merrie England the dance was part and parcel of everyday life. Country dances—expressions of merriment and jollity—were performed all over the country. They were, for the most part, simple and rough affairs. In France, however, the development of the "social" dance was proceeding. While the French peasants had their traditional dances the more graceful form of the art was being evolved at the court of the French kings. There lords and ladies danced slow-moving, gracious, pavannes and menuets.

All over Europe other dances were gradually evolved—tarantellas, chaconnes, sara-bands, tziganes, czardases, rigaudons, bourees, and gavottes. Then there came polonaises, mazurkas, and the waltz. In England, quadrilles, lancers, and polkas were popular.

During the last two centuries the greatest influence on the dance has come from France and Spain. French dancing teachers took the country dances and polished them until they were all graceful movement. In Spain, such dances as fandangos and boleros were per-

formed everywhere; and naturally they were taken in time into other countries.

The Ballet

The ballet began in Italy and gradually developed under such dancers as Vestris and Camargo, Taglioni, and Elssler. Ballet as an art was nurtured in France where it was patronised by the nobility, and then Russia became its spiritual home. There, under the Czars, it flourished, and when it was brought into Western Europe by Diaghileff, it came almost as an exotic art. Now ballet grows more popular every day in the world's capitals.

The Present Day

Early in the present century dances began to come into England from America. And in the period after the war, in the strained nervous atmosphere which demanded always something new, the foxtrot and its variations became popular. It was then only a step to "La Maxixe," the tango, and the rumba.

Novelties, such as the "Lambeth Walk" and "Chestnut Tree," come and are soon gone. But dancing has been going on for centuries; and some day, perhaps quite soon, a new dance will be composed which, like the waltz, will leap to favour and become universal.

It could even be suggested that, as dancing is the most universal form of expression, it is one of the best roads to understanding between peoples. It would be a strange joke of the gods if it proved so.

A special series, "Dancing Down the Ages," is now being prepared, and will be presented from National stations in the near future.