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Good-Night Lady

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It's more than a little tawdry and it's not exactly like the original marathon. But there's a fascination about it both for participants and on-lookers. The benches are jammed. Here's what they see:

HELLEN was weakening. She and her partner had entered the dance marathon as one of seventy couples bent on endurance and reward; she had entered a plump, vivacious brunette, pretty enough and attested by doctors to be in sound physical condition. That was eleven weeks before. The seventy couples had now thinned out to five, and all these were gummy-eyed, sunken-cheeked and numb with fatigue.

A slim young man spouting through a microphone told a listening world of the scene on the dance floor.

"The seventy-eighth day of the Golden Slipper Marathon Dance Contest," he blurbed. "Only five couples left on the floor. They're stumbling, slipping, fighting to keep awake. There's Helen sleeping on her partner's shoulder. Listen to the crowd yell as a judge comes up to look her over and see if she's fainted or just dozing." (He flaunts the microphone to embrace the crying, crowing spectators squared around the dance floor.) "Helen shudders awake. But she's wilting. It won't be long now.

"Her partner takes her out for the rest period of fifteen minutes. She can hardly stand. She looks twenty years older than when she started eleven weeks ago. But eleven weeks is a long

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A girl champion being rubbed down after 984 hours of dancing

time, folks. The other couples go on. This young guy who's been dancing solo for two weeks since his partner fainted—he hasn't got any girl yet. Their mates are sticking out the grind. It's going to be a bitter finish, folks. Better come along and see it for yourselves."

They came to see it—in hundreds. Helen was the particular favorite of that particular dance marathon. Wherever those organized atrocities are held, one competitor—male or female—becomes an established favorite, especially if he or she is a durable local product, as Joe Humphreys might say. Shrewd showmen promoting the dances are as quick to focus publicity on favorites like Helen as the public is to select these favorites.

They came to see Helen quit. But she didn't. Her feet were swollen. Every touch of the patched and worn dance floor hurt them. So she hobbled around on crutches. This she did for two days and two nights. Housewives thronged the place. Helen was their heroine, and they enjoyed feeling anguish at her all-too-evident pain. Her partner, a square-shouldered young man with the stamina of a deep-sea diver, clinched to save her all the suffering he could. But that wasn't enough. A record crowd saw Helen's final agony on that floor. She came out of the rest cubicle unrevived by consommé and coffee. Bravely she tried to go on, haggard and grim. A five-piece jazz band droned maddeningly. The four other pairs of dancers stumbled about in near-coma. Helen pushed a crutch, it skidded on a smooth spot of the dance floor. Helen skidded with it, and collapsed. She was through, through so utterly that she was insensible to a small shower of bills and coins that fell about her.

Sobs came from women spectators; some shed tears; but the grind of the dance went on and on. Helen, carried away, was revived. Her partner remained, brokenly weaving about the floor, watching the other dancers like a tired jackal, waiting for a male to falter and fail so that he could step in and partner the surviving female. He danced like that, alone, for five days and nights, only emerging from his semi-conscious daze to send word to Helen that if he won the prize he'd split his share with her.

That dance dragged on for another weary week. Then the climax. A

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Crutches help to take weight from sore feet after 20 days

jammed hall. Two couples left. Spectators divided in hysterical support of each team. A fresh band blared through the same tunes the dancers had heard for twelve solid weeks—a torture in itself. Days ago these “dancers” debased their steps to a mournful shuffle, mocked by jazz. From their twitching faces—faces that stir even in half-sleep—they might be damned souls toiling through eternity on an outer rim of Hades. A shout from the crowd—one pair collapses. A functionary steps out, chains the waists of the swerving pair together. That gives them what is technically called “contact,” so that even if leaden arms can no longer be lifted in an embrace—they’re still deemed to be dancing partners.

The prize of that dance was theirs—a grim-jawed young woman of thirty who might have been a circus acrobat, and a semi-bald man of about forty who could only have been what he was, a freak in mufti. Hours pass, spectators fade—and when the gate has gone, the dance ends. Two human machines are awarded the title of champion marathon dancers of their district, and the promoters have a two-way chuckle—over the profits and over the fools who make them possible.

Nobody seems to know just where this fad originated. If you visit a zoo you will find many things that resemble a marathon dance, and if you visit a marathon dance you will find many things that resemble a zoo. The swaying bear, the ambient wolf, the peripatetic lynx, to say nothing of the gibbering chimpanzee, are gluttons for motion, yet even these have sense enough to surrender to nature in replenishing sleep.

We’ve had rocking-chair marathons, talking marathons, roller-skating marathons and pie-eating marathons. All are equally silly, all are equally sad; but the dance marathon, more than any other, reveals human nature at its worst. It’s a bug that bites participants and spectators alike.

Research reveals that the first press mention of dance marathoning issued from Indiana. There an indignant hall proprietor, seeing the use to which his premises were put, ordered the dancers

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An exhausted contestant gains brief respite in partner's arms

and their backers to move. Another hall was hired and the dancers conveyed there in open trucks, shuffling as they rode.

Without that fillip of publicity, this newest and nuttiest of the arts might have been aborted and thousands of uncertified lunatics deprived of an opportunity for self-expression. Alert showmen have turned the fad into a well-organized business.

It works this way. They descend on a town like, say, Newark, New Jersey. They hire a dance hall, preferably in an amusement park. They hang up a first prize of \$2,000, with graded prizes down to \$50—about \$5,000 in all. That begins the ballyhoo. Entry blanks are open to everybody, including juveniles who must have the written consent of parents or guardians. Doctors examine all applicants to find if they're fit for the grueling grind. When passed, they team up with anybody of the opposite sex who's willing. Then time is hired on a local broadcasting station; three jazz bands are assigned eight-hour shifts, and the fun begins.

The Twin Trick

The dancers come from all walks of life, and in most cases they'd be better off if they'd keep on walking. Young and pretty girls line up with middle-aged women. Boys in their late teens compete with wiry veterans of sixty. Husbands and wives occasionally enter; but their records are poor. They quickly quarrel and reproduce all the atmosphere of home to get themselves chased by the judges.

One woman entrant in Detroit spotted her estranged husband at a dance-opening with another woman. She yanked him away, danced with him for weeks. They won the prize, split it and again split up.

A motley mob by day, in a variety of sports and street costumes, the marathoners resemble a beggars' ball. At night, when the customers pay their fifty cents by the hundreds, the dancers brighten. Many of them appear in evening clothes, although it's observable that the prettier women favor pajamas.

Both sexes are quartered just off the

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The weaker sex shows up to advantage after 80 days' dancing

dance floor in two dormitories, littered with wardrobe and baggage. Through with a forty-five-minute spell, they are clocked for fifteen minutes' rest. A fire siren hoots them in and out of the dormitories, where the cots are used in shifts.

Clockers guard against cheating. Two blond boys who looked like twins got away with a trick of wearing identical clothes, one going out for the other so that each, in turn, could get a full hour's sleep. The watchers were fooled, but not the other male dancers. These tolerated the deception until the marathon reached the stage where nerves began to crack. Then they exposed the boys. Disqualification followed.

The most favorable thing that can be said for the promoters of these marathons is that they feed the dancers well—eight meals a day prescribed by a dietitian. It's claimed that the boys and girls actually put on weight during a grind. Some of them were frank enough to confide that if there was nothing else in it, being fed and sheltered for six or seven weeks was an inducement in jobless times.

The men and women eat together; they are only separated in the dormitories, where close supervision is kept over them to guard against irrelevant entertainment. Yet the atmosphere of these affairs is pervaded by sex. Drinking is taboo among the dancers; spectators make up for that enforced abstinence. But every few hours bushels of cigarette stubs, mostly stained by lipstick, are swept from dance floors and rest-rooms. A slip of a girl told me that she consumed four packs a day—an indication of how the crazy contest rags the nerves. The dancers have no time out for a breath of fresh air, save during their fifteen-minute intervals. Leaving the floor for any reason during the forty-five-minute dance session brings instant disqualification.

The judges are stern, especially at the beginning of a marathon. They like to see the field thinned out because that conduces to partisanship by the spectators, and partisanship means swinging turnstiles. They are especially alert for love episodes. Jealousy crops out every now and then when a girl or a

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Sullen, semi-conscious fatigue characterizes most marathoners

man indicates a desire to change partners. Fist fights and hair-pulling often ensue, followed by ejection of the scrap-pers.

Permanent Partners

Romance invariably results from each dance. A man and woman who can tolerate each other through days and days of odious propinquity have initiation into the temperamental collisions of matrimony. In logic, that should cure them of the idea. In fact, it doesn't. Wedding bells always follow the bedlam for some pairs of prancers.

Indeed, I suspect that unmarried women go into these things with an eye to making a dance partner a life partner. I asked a stout lady in an expensive evening gown what induced her to leave her home in Chicago to take up marathoning. She had been the wife of an executive of a large national corporation. There was a glint in her eye as the question was asked, coupled with a smirk when it was answered.

"I've found my man," she said, tugging the sleeve of a broad-shouldered youth almost young enough to be her son. The youth gazed desirously at a doll-like girl in vivid magenta pajamas. She ogled him listlessly. He turned to talk to her; but the middle-aged woman tugged his sleeve and trotted him away.

"Nobody's going to get my man," she chirped over a pudgy shoulder.

About the second week of the dance, all the contestants know and call one another by first names. About the fourth week of a dance, the contestants come to call one another by any names that occur to them in their irritation at bumpings, collidings and accidental tramlings.

From that fourth week on to the finish the drama's at its best—or worst. Tempers are sharpened on jagged nerves; blow-ups are frequent.

A man who had achieved a reputation in half a dozen marathons for canniness in conserving his energies and the stamina of his partners caused a riot one night in Brooklyn. He had feet that would have stopped traffic anywhere. His girl would stand on them and be

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Joie Ray, former Olympic star, tries a new form of endurance competition

carried around the floor. In turn he would rest his chin on her shoulder and sneak over a snooze. But as the weeks wore on his girl developed an annoying trick of coming out of her dance coma and clawing his face. She didn't mean to do it; but she did it well—so well that word got around and customers piled in to see the act. Before a full house she clawed once too often. The gentleman exploded, landed a hay-maker and brought on a free-for-all in which the customers heartily participated until the girl was dragged away unconscious and sent to the massage table.

Mother Machree Enters

Tempers pop as the time flies. Couples who, in the early stages, brightened proceedings by rapid tangos or double hulas, concentrate on sticking rather than starring. They smell the prize and settle down stubbornly to win it. This engenders impatience with the side-racket specialists. These are the boys who sell their backs for advertising signs of local merchants and the dancers who juggle and sing to entice showers of coins from the spectators. One lad with a tenor voice like a circus calliope makes hundreds of dollars by singing Mother Machree at different marathons eleven times in a night in a style that should make the composer revolve in his grave. The customers toss him money with outspoken injunctions to shut up. So every time he comes out last in the crap games in which the hardier boys indulge during rest periods, he bounds to the floor and gives poor old Mother Machree another drubbing. Ringsiders always respond.

They sit there, hour after hour, watching for the weary marathoners to break down. And the weary marathoners in turn always respond. Towards the end of the grind each night witnesses some individual or couple go completely out. Many of them go quite mad, although it's granted that they don't have to go very far.

The Softest Racket

Women marathoners seem to be able to hold their mental balance longer than

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“Contact” is being maintained as an exhausted partner steals a nap

the men. Certainly they are more expert dancers. During lulls in the music you'll see girls teaching their partners new steps, usually some unorthodox new twist they themselves have invented. That, of course, is early in the dance. Towards the end the steps degenerate to painful plodding. Yet in those vivacious hours when the dance is young a specter lurks behind the life of the party. That specter is the lure that fills the marathon halls by night. It's really brutality, the sight of others in mental and physical anguish that gives beholders a greedy delight. It's the eternal fascination of the kill. Spiced by sex it makes a show to the taste of the tasteless.

Of course there are exceptions. At a marathon dance that had checked in more than a million customers over a period of five weeks, I spotted O. O. McIntyre, whose taste cannot be impugned, no matter what may be said about his tailor. “Odd” sat there bright-eyed—he only wears glasses to pick out his shirts. He'd been sitting there for hours and on many different days.

“Why?” I asked him.

“I like it,” he said.

Millions share Mr. McIntyre's curious pleasure in these moron clinics. At the present writing there are eleven marathons in full swing in eight different cities. Jack Curley, master of the sports stockyards where wrestlers eat, drink and make mayhem, is operating dance marathons on the chain-store plan. This shrewd showman plans a series of international marathons, finals of champion couples from all over the world, to be held in New York. He has rivals, because the racket has come at the right time when a fifty-cent top price for a show is practical and popular.

“It's the softest thing I've ever struck,” says the calculating but candid Mr. Curley. “As a craze it beats midget golf hollow. The customer doesn't have to do any work. There, my boy, is the secret of success in the exhibition business. Never make your customer exert himself beyond paying at the gate and getting his seat. This is ideal for promoter, participants and public. The

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The most approved method of resting while the partner carries on

promoter makes money because his show is continuous day and night; the participants are paid even if they don't win prizes. They have cash thrown at them by the customers and they're well fed. And the public has every variety of entertainment."

A soft racket like this was not long overlooked by the authorities. In various cities health inspectors dug up the old laws enacted to stop six-day bike racing. These prohibit participation in any athletic event by any individual for more than twelve hours continuously. Curley and his pals kicked that law in its rubber teeth by teaming up bike riders. In dance marathons they get by with that fifteen-minute rest in each hour. Besides, every entrant signs a legal release, so that, whatever happens, the promoters are covered.

Through the haze and odor of one of these marathons at its mad stage, when the boys and girls had been grinding for a solid month, a wiry man in his mid-thirties who had danced throughout in overalls staggered into the dormitory.

He was a steam-fitter by trade until the marathon bug bit him.

"I'm in this racket—for fun and money," he said. "It's going to be my life work. I never win a prize but I get my keep and about thirty bucks a week for my whistling act."

He began to whistle, piercingly—but a fellow artist socked him with a pillow and he fell over on his cot—asleep.

Twenty a Week

Outside was a pleasant-faced girl who would have been quite pretty if she hadn't been quite fat.

"What am I in this game for?" said she, with perhaps merited scorn in her tone at an obvious question. "What does a girl go into any racket for? Money, of course. I've got two babies to keep. My husband left me—to become a marathon dancer. He's playing in that one up in Boston. So I took up the racket. Oh, I only knock down about twenty dollars a week. You see, I ain't got no specialty like that gal over there. She can do the split."

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Prize-winning tactics: this girl is being supported on her partner's feet

Figuring hurriedly with a blunt pencil and a blunter arithmetic, this twenty bucks a week for eighteen hours a day works out at what? Too much for the pleasure given the public; too little for the pain given the patient.

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