

# AMERICANS LEARNING ENGLISH FOLK MUSIC.

## An Interview in "The Musical Herald."

MISS MARY NEAL has returned to London after four months spent in American cities with Miss Florence Warren. New York and Boston have taken up morris dancing. In the schools also teachers were obliged to teach it, and, having wrong ideas of the dances, they did not like them, but now that they have seen the real thing they are completely converted. Here we have put into the dances the romance of the past and the pride of long possession, but America takes them for what they are worth now. A number of troupes have been started. The *Musical Herald* representative called on Miss Neal to report progress. "How did your visit come about?" we asked.

"In the most casual way, through an American lady receiving an invitation to attend a concert given by the Espérance Club at Lord Ellesmere's, Bridgewater House. Madame Genée, the dancer, was having her picture painted by the Hon. Neville Lytton at the same time as our Morris Dancers. I sent her the ticket, and she sent it to her American friend, who was charmed with what she saw, said she must have Miss Warren dancing in America, and she would then start a movement on the same lines as the English one. She was as good as her word. A fashionable artistic set backed her up. We started at the MacDowell Club, and in a few days trained twenty-four men and women for a display for their Christmas masque. Amongst them were artists, authors, and such responsible people as the head of the electric lighting department of New York. Out of the nucleus of that troupe we trained another to illustrate lectures, and amongst these were Dr. Gulick's nephew and his daughter. In Boston also we trained a troupe of Harvard students and their girl friends. Miss Warren has been giving a display at Columbia University, also one for the Educational Alliance, at which the chairman, Dr. Leipziger, said most feelingly that he had never seen anything so beautiful. Another important society at which we appeared was the Sons and Daughters of the Revolution, who trace their ancestors to the promoters of the War of Independence. I spoke at Albany at a meeting in support of a "safe and sane" celebration of the Fourth of July, for which our dances are much better fitted than the rowdyism and accidents which often occur. I also addressed high schools, women's clubs, Boston Twentieth Century Club, Clark University, the Parks and Playground Society, the dramatic committee for supporting a civic theatre, and so on. Sixty pupils joined Miss Warren's classes in Boston in five days. Miss Warren is obliged to return home for the Stratford-on-Avon Summer School, but there is a possibility that she may afterwards spend two years in the States, taking a trained troupe to summer schools, Chataqua, and graduation exercises. After that it is proposed to form two troupes, one going East and the other West. At present she is teaching for the Froebel Society, and I have almost promised to join her either in October or February next. In all this work the lessons are based on the 'Espérance Morris Book,' and the MS. of the forthcoming second volume."

"Your impressions of America, please."

"I was struck by the extreme civilisation of the cities, and by the complete mastery over material Nature. There is no drudgery. The standard of living is very much higher than in England. I went amongst every class; the houses of the millionaires, the settlements, universities, also from the millionaires' theatre to the lowest music hall, also into private houses and schools. In one hall, lady performers who did not please were lifted by the waist and taken off the stage, to others the audience threw money or booed. The men, if not liked, literally took the hook, a large cane hook being put round their neck to pull them away. The American does not sit down and put up with discomforts. Winter is defied by heating, night by electric lighting, and so on. Business men and newspapers are easy of access. In London, editors are protected by the lift man and every grade of assistant, but in America all doors are thrown open, and I called on editors personally. One of the most important of them said, 'Keep me posted; I want to follow this thing up.' American lightheartedness also strikes one; the way in which they are ready to take on anything. They have no great traditions and are open to receive new impressions. There is a reverse side. England has a deep, strong, rhythmic impulse. The rhythm of America is much more on the surface; it is the rhythm of machinery, it is all artificial. I learnt to appreciate the coloured people. I stayed in a house where the coloured housemaid earning a pound a week in the winter, was a prima donna in the

summer, and she took housework with the stipulation 'I never bend.' When she brought my first good cup of tea, I was so pleased that I wanted her to sing with me 'God save the King.' She replied, 'I don't know him.'"

"Is there any scope for folk-music there?"

"America needs it even more than we do. As they have there the folk of all nations it is a wonderful country to study folk matters. I hope to assist in starting an International Folk Study Society, having its headquarters in America, to study folk-song, folk-music, folk-dance, folk-drama, folk-legend, folk-religion, folk-lore of every nation. Dr. Stanley Hall is very keen upon this proposal, and there should be in every country a representative of each of these sections. I had not left my work for fifteen years, and now after four months' absence I have got the whole subject much more in perspective. Americans, having so many nationalities, know more about folk matters than any one country, and I was interested to find that they completely grasped the difference between folk-dancing and any other kind of dancing. They realise that you cannot have too much technical skill in classical and ball dancing, or, as they call it, æsthetic dancing; they realise, too, that folk-dancing is spontaneous. It is the same difference which musicians discern between folk-song and composed song. A dance evolved by the people, they understand, must be carried on in the same way, and the less teaching the better. On my return I saw the miracle of folk-dancing worked over again. Girls came into the Club on a particularly bad night, dispirited by the weather conditions and their day's tailoring and dress-making, and the boys arrived from electroplating, motor building, etc. A lady offered to teach a new dance. In half an hour everybody was dancing in perfect time, faces were lighted up, and no one would imagine that they were the same persons who arrived earlier in the evening. Only folk-dancing could do it."

"Is this revival going to spread?"

"Unless it is of civic value it is not worth my while to give my life to it. As a big national movement, as I believe it is, it will have a great civic effect; it will put boys and girls in tune with the real rhythm of the country, and it will re-energise them. This movement originated with the people, and if any who are not of the 'folk' want to practise it, they must reverently learn from the people. That is what we are trying to do in Crosby Hall. I am glad to be back home again, and to find my work half as large again as when I left it; there is a larger working balance, all my teachers are engaged, and a great many engagements are booked, including performances at the Festival of Empire. The devotion and loyalty of all my workers makes me a proud woman to-day."

As a proof of the genuine interest aroused by her tour, Miss Neal showed us a number of letters, programs, and press cuttings.

Miss Kate Douglas Wiggin, the well-known authoress, wrote inviting Miss Neal and Miss Warren to dine with her, and said, "It is so rare to hear any speak so delightfully as you, Miss Neal, and to find such a teaching genius as Miss Warren, that I want to get all the inspiration I can." These are the headlines in the *New York Evening Post*, one of the many reports in American papers. "New York trying to learn Morris Dancing." "Miss Neal, Who Seeks to Reproduce the Village Gayety of Shakespeare's Day, Shows her Wares to Audience That Knows Boston and Two-Step." "One 'Hour of Merrie England.'" Another report, after pictures and a column and a half of description, concludes: "Hereafter many Lynn people in reading of the old-time dances on the village green or at the country fair will be able to picture the pretty scene because of the entertainment of morris dances presented by Miss Neal and Miss Warren last evening." Quite lengthy articles appeared in the best known papers, usually with illustrations, and one of them begins thus: "However difficult the ambitious hostess finds it to secure men who appreciate the privilege of dancing all night and going to business in the morning, when it comes to real old English morris dances, the masculine world is in its element." The *Literary Digest* said, "Old songs, dances, pageants, and plays are bringing a new spirit into the life of the common people in England, and America is promised a share of it."

Miss Neal will be glad to hear from Canadians and others who may like to have the services of Miss Warren while she is in the United States.



so that we found his steps varied in many points from those of the old men who were members of the original "side." We are hoping that before it is too late this Headington "side" will be revived under Mr. W. Mark Cox, and will have amongst its members some at least of the old dancers. If so, we shall take the members of the Espérance Club for a joint performance at Oxford. This should be a very interesting occasion. From time to time traditional dancers are invited to London, and quite recently Mr. Horwood, aged sixty-four, and old Mr. Trafford, aged seventy-five, came up from Headington and went through the dances with the members of the Espérance Club, who are responsible for handing on the dances.\*

They both expressed themselves as delighted with the way in which the dances were interpreted. Speaking of Miss Florence Warren, Mr. Horwood said, "That young lady would have half London dancing in a quarter of an hour." Perhaps as it was his first visit to the city, he did not quite realise its size!

Old Mr. Trafford was a famous dancer in his time, some fifty or sixty years ago. Once he was challenged to dance "Jockie to the Fair" on an inverted beer barrel for a wager of £5. He expressed his ability to dance it on an inverted quart pot also. He won the £5 challenge, and was then asked to fulfil his boast for 5s.

"Did you do it?" I asked. "Every step," he replied. Anyone who knows "Jockie" will, I think, acknowledge that Mr. Trafford is a real expert in morris dancing, and that his opinion on the execution of the dances counts for much.

Another old dancer of eighty-four had to show me the steps with his hands as he was too stiff to dance. He was delighted to think of the young people learning the dances.

Since the publication of the first volume of this book many interesting events have taken place, land-

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\* Since writing the above the traditional "side" has been re-organised with three of the old dancers as members, and they and the Espérance Club gave a very successful performance at Oxford.

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Events move so quickly that on my return to England I find much to add to the above introduction. Miss Warren is still in America and has taken part with her troupe of American dancers in a performance given by Madame Geneé at Boston. Madame Geneé expressed herself very warmly with regard to Miss Warren, and said that her winsome personality had done much for the success of the movement in America. Now news

marks in the history of the revival of folk art. At Easter, 1910, I opened a holiday hotel at Littlehampton, of which I am one of the hon. presidents, for elementary school teachers who wanted to learn morris dances, folk-songs, and the children's singing games. Miss Warren taught the dances and games, and Mr. Clive Carey the songs. In less than a week after the issue of the announcement of the course of lessons we had filled the house, and the work was in every way a great success. In July and August a course of instruction was arranged on the same lines in connection with the summer festival at Stratford-on-Avon, the season ticket issued including performances of Shakespeare, plays by Mr. and Mrs. Benson's Shakespearean Company, and lessons in morris dancing, children's games, by Miss Florence Warren, and folk-songs by Mr. Clive Carey.

In October, 1910, the directors of old Crosby Hall, which has been re-erected at More's Gardens, Chelsea, placed it at the disposal of the Espérance Guild of Morris Dancers for a monthly practice of folk dances.

So that now there is established in the capital of the Empire a national centre, where all those who have learned the folk dances may meet socially and practise them, and where those who doubt that England possesses her own folk dances may come and see for themselves that the merry morris still lives in the hearts of the English people.

Another significant event is the invitation which came to Miss Warren and myself to visit America and begin the revival of folk music there on the lines on which it had been begun in England. I am writing this introduction in New York, where Miss Warren makes her début in a masque arranged by the members of the MacDowell Club. She also introduces to the ball which follows the masque three "sides" of morris dancers, men and women whom she has trained. We have had a wonderful reception, and are already at work training a number of school teachers who bid fair to rival our English dancers. They will illustrate lectures and help us in our entertainments while we are here.

reaches me that Miss Warren is to marry an American gentleman and settle over there, and that she hopes to make herself the centre of and to organise a national movement in America on the lines of the Espérance Guild of Morris Dancers in England.

Another interesting result of our visit to Boston was that I was able to find some of the sea shanties published in this book.