

sewerage, or rather its defects, is still an open inquiry. The question in its length and breadth is in a disgraceful condition of neglect, from the scientific point of view. Canadians unfortunately generally prefer to settle questions for themselves rather than appeal to experts; but they may yet be brought to see that there could be no worthier subject for a Royal Commission of doctors and matrons, although it will be quite necessary to renew this hint when our Ottawa rulers are more at home, and have less of "Canada Pacific" considerations weighing upon their minds. But the public health should never come second. When the "commission" becomes a fact, we shall want to have the entire question of baby-farming put on such a footing that the coroner shall be able to deal with all cases of wilful neglect as they arise, in the spirit of a Christian jurisprudence, which is certainly not the case at present. Even now the civic authorities could tabulate the infant mortality more effectually and distribute it correctly for the several wards. If the special mortality of children in summer could be proved to arise from the heat and nothing else, the problem would be immensely simplified, and we should only have to adopt such refrigerating arrangements for our dwellings, as would be quite feasible, to gently reduce it. But there seems no such hope. It is heat in combination with other material influences. It is quite the fashion to exercise our minds on the subject of population, and all the time we are allowing one of the best sources of population—that by natural increase—to run to waste, to the wounding of the tenderest affections of families. The class feelings that form so marked a characteristic of colonial life will doubtless some day be modified, so as to admit of social improvements—such, for example, as play-grounds as well as mere walking-grounds for the children of the poor, such as they are now getting in England, and to admit of the trouble being taken of keeping the people from destroying themselves from day to day under the wheels of the locomotives. Mr. Hickson and Mr. Senecal are probably already in possession of sufficient powers to prevent people from boarding or getting off trains while in motion, and from trespassing on the railway tracks. Both these gentlemen must wish to save life wherever it is possible to do so, and can have no sympathy with the reckless suicides. Our citizens as a body would be heartily glad to see such matters set right, and to get rid of the painful sense of powerlessness that now afflicts them.

Civis.

THE MODESTY OF LOW DRESSES.

In last week's SPECTATOR the writer of a short article on the custom of wearing low-neck dresses in the evening closes, I think I may presume, *her* article by asking why ladies should be ashamed of being seen with exposed necks and shoulders in the mornings but not in company in the evenings, and hopes for a reply from some candid woman or man.

Perhaps as a candid man I may be permitted to answer this question, and also incidentally to refer to some other kindred customs which are the not infrequent subjects of discussion. The puzzled querist comes very near the answer to the question in the article itself where reference is made to the fact that women in certain countries wear next to no clothes without any feeling of shame; but that the bearing of this fact on the question has been missed is shown by the anecdote which follows as an evidence of "the absurdity of where modesty begins and where it ends." The inference which we are to draw from this case of a lady who was in the habit of wearing low dresses in evening society, but felt dreadfully shocked at being found by a male acquaintance in an equally undressed condition in the daytime, must be, either that the lady was modest in the morning when her male visitor surprised her, and was immodest in the evening when an equal exposure was unblushingly presented to probably the same eyes, or that for a woman under any ordinary social occasions to expose her neck and shoulders is immodest, and she who does not appreciate the fact is guilty of, at least many think, no feeling on the subject. Now, I think it can be easily shown that both these too common inferences are wrong, and proceed from the assumption that a certain minimum of clothing is absolutely necessary to the preservation of female modesty. This, however, is by no means the case, for the kind of modesty in question is neither the presence nor the absence, nor the fashion of clothes, nor an intellectual conclusion, but a feeling which is excited by different conditions in different countries, periods and classes. In other words the modesty of an action is not to be determined by the action itself, but by the influence which the action has upon the minds of the actors and their associates. This will appear more clearly if we give some illustration of the manner in which modesty is shocked in different people in the same or different countries, and in the same people in different circumstances. In the first place, as has already been remarked, among many of the tropical peoples the absence of clothes conveys no shock to their modesty, because clothes being quite unnecessary the sense of personal decency is not outraged by their want; but it would be quite unjustifiable to therefore infer that these people had no true modesty. Another illustration from a higher stage of society is still more forcible. In the East I have often admired the graceful forms and motions of the Arab girls drawing and carrying

water from the wells, and have marked with interest the genuine modesty with which, when I was observed, they hastily drew part of their scanty garment over their faces, which according to their creed it was the height of immodesty to reveal, and at the same time exposed the greater part of their shapely figures without thought of indecency. Again, in European countries where peasant women do outdoor work, I have seen them working in the fields or trudging modestly enough on the roads with a shortness of skirts rivalling those of a ballet girl, while their lady fellow countrywomen blush at the accidental revelation of an inch or so of ankle, though perhaps at the same time exposing an amount of neck and bosom which would outrage the modesty of the peasant. And so the further we travel the more we find that, *not modesty*, but what is calculated to excite feelings of modesty, varies indefinitely among different peoples and classes of peoples, or as a most respectable and orthodox Anglo-Indian wife and mother once said to me: "Decency in England and decency in India are very different." To which I answered, I believe with truth, "Decency is very much an affair of climate." And now, if we return to the lady in the tale who was shocked to be seen with bare shoulders in the morning and not in the evening, we shall conclude that she was equally modest on both occasions, but that according to her ideas it was not decent to display so much of her person on the one occasion and was quite decent to do so on the other, and therefore her modesty was excited by the one but was not aroused by the other. Nor was there any greater contradiction in this difference of feeling in this instance than there would be if the same person felt no discomfort at men seeing her on the sands or in the water at the seaside, as they often do, in a costume which would be highly indecent and consequently uncomfortable in St. James Street.

Closely allied to this question of decency of attire and its action on modesty are the varying ideas of decency of conduct and its influence on modesty. To illustrate this let us consider the rules which regulate the conduct of young girls of good position in France, England and Canada. In the first a young girl is not allowed to hold any social intercourse with young men not very nearly related to her, in the second, girls may in company talk and enjoy the society of young men but to walk, drive, or receive visits alone is considered most improper, while in Canada a young girl may walk or drive with and receive visits alone from young men with perfect propriety. Now in all these cases the actions are themselves exactly the same, and argue neither modesty nor immodesty on the part of their actors, and yet we may safely say that the English girl could not associate with young men with the freedom which is harmless and innocent on the part of Canadian girls without taint, nor could a French girl emulate the moderate freedom of the English girl without a consciousness of impropriety. And thus in the case of conduct, as in that of attire, it is not necessarily the actions themselves but their effect on the minds of the actors and their associates which constitute their propriety or impropriety. Before concluding there is another question of modesty of conduct to which it may not be profitless to allude as it is the subject of much debate and more abuse. I refer to round-dancing in society. Is round dancing modest or not? The Puritan says it is highly immodest, at least provocative of, to put it mildly, immodesty. The men and women of the world, not necessarily worldly men and women, say it is not immodest. The latter argue from the facts of either their own or their friends' and relatives' average experience; the former from their ideas of what they think it would be in their own case or from cases where immodesty has confessed it could utilize round-dancing in its service. To dogmatize on the latter grounds is about as convincing and sound as it would be for a Turk, who knows or thinks he knows that he would be most immodest to shake hands with a woman, to argue that therefore the Puritan who shakes hands with his lady friends is a lewd fellow, or at least in danger of losing the fine edge of his purity. In short, the modesty of round-dancing like that of low-neck dresses is purely a question of the effects which it may have on the minds of the dancers.

I have now shortly endeavoured to answer the question originally proposed, and I trust that I have satisfied the proposer and other doubters that while modesty is itself a constant feeling, the circumstances which excite the feeling vary indefinitely in different people and the same people in different circumstances and that to wear low-neck dresses or short dresses, or for that matter no dresses, or to take solitary walks or drives, or to bathe with or to receive visits from or to dance with the other sex, are not themselves either modest or immodest actions, but the right or wrong of which depend altogether upon the effect which they produce on the individual or the society in which they occur.

In regard to the questions of the healthfulness or good or bad taste of wearing low-neck dresses, or of dancing, or on the various social effects of the varying rules of social intercourse between men and women, I do not propose to enter, further than to say in regard to the question of attire, it will I believe be a happy day for society when men and women will so dress as to minimize their personal deficiencies and enhance their personal advantages. In which case it would not be long before a fine and therefore healthy form would be an object of ambition and its more frequent attainment would not only please the artist but sensibly improve the coming race.