

Health, Morality and the Playground

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Our whole country is in a process of becoming citified. It is a process that is going on at an astonishing rate, and is, in fact, one of the chief agencies for the spread of civilization among us. We should like to see this process promoted in every possible way, but at the same time we must not forget that it presents to us the new problem of saving to our people their country life. An increasing number and an increasing proportion of our people are as hopelessly removed from the real open country, with all that it means for our national health and vigor and clean imagination, as if they were shut in by a Chinese wall. But the fact remains that we not only need the country and all that it represents for our national well-being, but every one of our people needs the country and all that it represents. We can not bring the real country to all of them. At the very best we have only found it possible to do a little in this direction. There are three things that are working to this end and all three need the largest possible encouragement: One is the facilitating of brief visits to the real country, particularly in the summer time. Another is the provision of city parks, which, with their fields and woodlands and stretches of water, preserve some of the most beautiful features of the country for city eyes to look upon. The third is the public playground, which offers to city children a chance for some of the free sport in open air and on mother earth that children in the real country enjoy without knowing how precious a thing it is.

A system of public parks, well managed in accordance with modern ideas of variety and naturalness in their treatment, is a glory to any city. Such parks offer to the poorest who may be within reach of them, a breath of country air and a glimpse of country greenery. But even under modern management they leave much to be desired, and under a

less modern management there is far too much about them that is suggestive of a cemetery.

A five-year-old youngster of my acquaintance was taken not long ago to see the beauties of Greenwood. When he caught sight of the great collection of costly monuments in that city of the dead, he promptly exclaimed, "Oh, what a lot of bric-a-brac!" From the artistic point of view there was undoubtedly justification for this criticism, and something like it would fairly represent the small-boy attitude to many of the show places of our city parks. For him they are bric-a-brac kept under glass. The part of the modern park system which most appeals to him, and ought to appeal to him, is the part which gives him a chance to do something. For any real lover of human nature—boy and girl nature—the most beautiful thing of all in our public parks to-day is a lot of children hard at play where there is room to play and nobody cares whether the grass grows or not.

Now that a beginning has been made in provision for playgrounds, and fairly effective means have been employed for the supervision and management of such grounds, the most urgent question seems to be the question of room. There can be no doubt, I think, that this movement is to go a great deal farther than it has yet gone. A great deal more ground can be used in this way with incalculable advantage to public health, public morals, and the general efficiency of our people. In fact I think it would be difficult to find any point at which, in our largest cities, a dollar will go further in the making of those things for which the city exists than in the provision and maintenance of playgrounds. I think we shall find a good many more ways of taking city children out into the open country. The development of this side of the movement ought certainly to be watched and furthered in every possible

way, but nothing will take the place of a playground near at hand to which the children can run on short notice and from which they can quickly return, so that the playground becomes an integral part of the daily life. I think, too, we have reason to expect that the roof playground will become much more general in our city schools. So much clear space lifted high above the street, as is

represented by a school-house roof, can not be allowed to go unused. New ways are to be found, too, by which the vacation school, the school garden, and the organized teaching of play, will work together with the public playground for the promotion of playground purposes; but the main thing now, apparently, is more room, and a great deal more room. Public interest and public conscience must be awakened to provide more room.