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Arthur Gunderson

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Cutting a Fine Figure

Condensed from Collier's, The National Weekly

Marie Beynon Ray

I MET a middle-aged acquaintance the other day whom I hadn't seen for two years, and I almost passed her by because she'd grown, not so much older, but so much younger. Face-lifting, gland treatment, falling in love? None of these. It wasn't the face that was younger — but it isn't the face that grows old first. It's the body, which slumps and sags and develops the middle-aged spread and the housekeepers' droop. . . .

"What I've been doing," my friend admitted, "is going to a gym. I happened to glance in a full-length mirror when I had less on than a bathing suit — and I was revolted. I resolved to take steps, and I did."

Only the day before I had talked on this same subject with Dr. Kristian Hansson, Director of Physical Therapy at the Hospital for the Ruptured and Crippled in New York. Speaking of the deformities such as sway-back, round shoulders, flat chest, protruding abdomen, which creep upon us in middle age, he said:

"In youth the body is wide at the chest and narrow at the abdomen, but with advancing age it becomes narrow at the

chest and wide at the abdomen. If we manage to prevent this, and we can by exercise, our bodies retain their youthful lines into old age. The abdomen has mighty muscles, four layers of them, running horizontally, perpendicularly, and obliquely. What a corset! Women who keep this one strong and supple as in youth need no other. But when these muscles become flabby the whole body sags. At almost any age we can correct these abnormalities."

I glanced now at the man I had come to see, Joseph Pilates, the living proof of the truth of these statements. Standing there in his trunks, he appeared to be in his twenties. He assured me he was 54. I couldn't believe it. Pilates originated a system of exercises still used by the Hamburg police; has been painted and sculptured by innumerable famous artists, and can do more with one hand than many a champion can do with his whole body.

"Sports are wonderful for the constitution generally," he said, "but they are of little value for correcting what's wrong with you — and there's something wrong with almost everyone. 'Corrective exercise' is the only

way to build a beautiful, strong, youthful body. The doctors back us up in this."

For our common deformities, according to the doctors, there is usually one cause and one cure. Our bodies usually become misshapen through bad posture. And to obtain correct posture only one order (we have the authority of Pilates for this) is necessary: "Pull the abdomen in."

Here is a portrait of the average man or woman: Head forward — two or three inches out of alignment with the spine; shoulders rounded, chest hollowed, spine curved noticeably forward at the waistline, abdomen protruding. Practically every fault of the figure comes down in the last analysis to the matter of a straight spine such as normal children have. And to straighten the spine what we chiefly have to do is to "pull in the abdomen."

Sounds simple, doesn't it? But it has to be done in a special way. The hips must be thrown forward; the lower abdomen held in, thus forcing the chest high and the head up, without lifting the shoulders — and that position must be held as long as possible. A few other remedial exercises must be gone through daily, if you care two pins about having a 20-year-old figure at the age of 50. Here is one that Pilates recommends: Lie down and try to make the whole length of the

spine touch the floor, likewise the shoulders and arms, stretched above the head. You can't do it, but trying is what counts. With the arms stretched above the head, raise the torso s-l-o-w-l-y, keeping the legs on the floor and the knees unbending. As you raise, the arms come slowly at right angles to the torso, the toes are pointed forward, the chin comes down on the chest. Now, sitting up, still with the legs stiff, try to touch the toes with the fingers. Keep on trying. Eventually you should be able to touch the wrists to the toes and the forehead to the knees. Now go slowly backward, chin down, arms rising. The whole thing is a slow rolling movement — and it will not only correct sway-back but will reduce the abdomen and poise the head correctly.

Pilates warns that no exercises should be taken except upon the advice of a physician. Heart trouble, hernia, etc., might make some inadvisable. In any case, much as corrective exercises can do for you, your little daily habits of walking, breathing, sitting, standing can do even more. "Say you're at the movies, or at your desk — or your typewriter or the dining table — all you have to do is to sit as far back as possible, spine upright, feet flat on the floor, knees bent at right angles, and every so often say to yourself, 'Pull your abdomen in,' and

do it, and hold it as long as you can. Or you're walking along the street. Glance in the shop windows, not to lower your sales resistance, but to observe your posture. In most cases the posture won't be right from one window to the next. But correct it every time — by pulling in the abdomen and holding it in as long as you can. Time yourself. It will be only a few seconds to begin with, but hold it a few counts longer each time until you work up to a hundred. With each effort the muscles will become stronger and 'standing up tall' will become a habit.

"You're waiting for a trolley. This need not be time wasted. You can do your exercises without attracting the attention of the police. Most women stand with the weight on one leg and the hip thrown out — someone has told them it's cute. Most men stand with the legs apart, hands in pockets, stomach thrust forward — looking jaunty, they think; in reality just tiring themselves out. But try this: rest the weight on both feet equally, heels together, toes apart, neither allowing the knees to sag nor pressing them backward. Then sway like a flagpole, shifting the weight slowly from one foot to the other, without thrusting the hip out. Occasionally raise the released foot and swing it about, but always, always pulling the abdomen in.

"How much can be accomplished by daily habit is shown by those people of the East who habitually sit cross-legged on the ground (the best of all sitting postures). They have straight backs and beautiful carriages. At the beach is an excellent place to practice such corrective postures. Sit cross-legged in the sand, back straight, and try raising from this position dozens of times without touching the ground with the hands but holding them out straight in front of you. In the free-and-easy environment of the beach even more eccentric behavior than this passes without comment; but you can do it in the privacy of your room if you prefer.

"Up to 80 years, everyone should be able to touch the floor with both palms without bending the knees. And in order that they may be able to do that, I advise them to start in right now, whether they are six months or 60 years, running around the room on all fours, like an animal, palms flat on the floor, knees unbending."

But Pilates' chief, reiterated order is: "Pull your abdomen in." Say it to yourself dozens, hundreds of times a day, till pulling it in becomes a habit and sinks down into the subconscious where your breathing is taken care of. Every time you do it, you're a little nearer to healthful, youthful posture and a regal carriage.