

Robert Cowley

“Our Dancing Daughters”.

Cowley, Robert: “Our Dancing Daughters”. From the book b12082 Horizon, Autumn 1967, Vol. IX, No 4. [98-99 pages]

Her skirts are high and inching relentlessly higher, her hair is bobbed and growing shorter, her lips are bee-stung after the fashion of the very latest movie queen. She seems determined to emphasize her boyish-ness at the expense of once-lush expanses of bust and hip. (It is said that she has not only lost her waist; she sits on it.) Her moral standards and manners shock her elders. She "gives an impression of strength and independence, it is true," one writer complains,

but she seems cruder, less polished. Her laugh is louder than it used to be. She lacks a certain graciousness, an appealing finesse and poise which characterized her older sister. She is not quite a lady... She has gained something, per-haps, but at the same time she has lost something. And I am sorry.

Consider not the mod girl or the teeny-bopper. Consider the flapper.

Flapper. The word evokes pictures of moonlight—did she ever exist in the day? —and the safe, small-city society of the upper middle class, of dances at the country club or college fraternity, of stolen exits and embraces in parked cars.

Long before she is out of her teens, she has presumably been kissed almost more times than she cares to remember and is secretly proud of being called a "speed" behind her back: "in a strange town," as Scott Fitzgerald wrote, "it was an advantageous reputation."

But speed is not only a matter of reputation; it has become a way of life. Months are as years to her, and by twenty-one she can look forward to crossing her flapper bar. "The only kick I get out of life any more," the jaded specimen in her early twenties tells a casual paramour of the parking lot, "is driving seventy miles an hour. You love it, too, don't you? . . . You would, of course. You're like me. Mad. All the people worth knowing are a little mad."

Though the word "flapper" is relatively ancient, these connotations were not. Its precise origins are obscure. In seventeenth-century England, apparently, the word "flap" was a synonym for a girl of loose inclinations. The *Oxford English Dictionary* has traced "flapper" as far back as 1773: "a young wild duck, unable to fly." But by the nineteenth century the earlier definition had prevailed. As H. L. Mencken points out, the word is listed in Barrere and Leland's *A Dictionary of Slang, Jargon, and Cant* (1889) "in the sense of 'a very young girl trained to vice, generally for the amusement of elderly men.'" Gradually the word became respectable; by the time of the Great War it referred to young girls with their hair not yet up. Flapper, Mencken writes in *The American Language*,

began to be heard in the United States not later than 1910, and it had, from the start, a perfectly unopprobrious signification. It is one of a long series of jocular terms for a young and somewhat foolish girl, full of wild surmises and inclined to revolt against the precepts and admonitions of her

elders. *Flapper* soon yielded *flap-perhood*, *flapperdom*, *flapper age*, *flapperish* and *flapper vote*. All save the last reached America, but they survived only until *flapper* itself succumbed to various home-brewed terms . . .

The familiar notion is that the flapper was the home-brew of Scott Fitzgerald; the fact that the popular magazines of the time were in the habit of proclaiming him as her "discoverer" may account for it. To the extent that he created the stereotype they were right. Isabelle, the debutante with the "desperate past" in *This Side of Paradise* was the literary original of the flapper:

Her education or, rather, her sophistication, had been absorbed from the boys who had dangled on her favor; her tact was instinctive, and her capacity for love-affairs was limited only by the number of the susceptible within telephone distance. Flirt smiled from her large black-brown eyes . . .

It is true that many of the characteristics associated with the flapper were in evidence before the beginning of the Jazz Age. But the flapper as we know her came into being about 1920 with the generation that had grown into adolescence during the war. That was the year in which women finally got the vote, and bobbed hair became a national issue along with the Volstead Act and the Ku Klux Klan. Soon after, the skirt went up—an event that was for the new decade at least as memorable as and probably a lot more significant than, say, the publication of *Main Street* or the election of Warren G. Harding.

The short skirt and prohibition established the moral tone of the 1920's; jazz, with its "weird barbaric interludes" (Fitzgerald's phrase), set the mood. The whole tempo of life in postwar America seemed to throb with its jerky and brazen rhythms. It was in this infectious sense that a writer for the *Ladies' Home Journal* used the word:

We walked up Broadway encompassed with a fierce jazz of light, barbaric in color, savage in gyrating motion, stupefying the optic nerves . . . It seemed an appropriate vestibule to the temple of the modern dance. One's mind became suitably muddled, and that without recourse to alcohol. A free narcotic was dispensed to the hurrying thousands of pleasure seekers.

Is there not some connection between incoherence outside and inside? Is not all America a little touched with jazz? . . .

All America *was* a little touched with jazz, and no one more than the flapper. She was the creation of jazz, this kind of jazz, and its perfect expression. Her attitude was put beautifully in one of those now-forgotten imitations of *This Side of Paradise* that were epidemic in the early 1920's. The scene is, inevitably, a dance floor.

"I never saw anything like it—whole dances in the dark'," exclaims an incredulous young man to his flapper partner. "'Do they keep it that way all evening?'"

"Oh, no," she answers, weaving with her fan an accompaniment to the music. "'They turn 'em on after awhile. It gives you a new sensation, anyway—That's good jazz, I'll tell anyone.'"

"That was it," the author concluded. "Dancers in the dark—in search of a new sensation."

Editorial writers and magazine journalists reserved a special fury for the dancers in the dark and their new sensations. "Does Jazz Put the Sin in Syncopation?" asked Anne Shaw Faulkner (Mrs. Max Oberndorfer), the National Music Chairman of the General Federation of Women's Clubs. Obviously it did, as she proceeded to explain in what seems now a delightful bit of camp. "Jazz," Mrs. Oberndorfer maintained, "disorganizes all regular laws and order; it stimulates to extreme deeds, to a breaking away from all rules and conventions; it is harmful and dangerous, and its influence is wholly bad." She even managed to connect jazz with Bolshevism. Mrs. Oberndorfer would have been the first to agree with Bishop Cannon of the Methodist church, who warned that jazz dances brought "the bodies of men and women in unusual relations to each other." But no one quite matched the *Journal* writer who invoked the awful majesty of history. "Jazz," he warned, "is a signboard on the road that was traveled by Greece and Rome":

Orgies of lewd dancing preceded the downfall of those nations. Once they had been strong and clean, but they became enervated and danced themselves into the abyss. . . . Modern history is full of the dancing softness which has led to the downfall of dynasties, including that of the Russians.

For the most part the flapper and her sheik were oblivious to these expressions of alarm. They seemed to take a positive delight in annoying their elders, sometimes to the point of deliberately manufacturing evidence of their wildness. Occasionally some indignant and earnestly rebellious young man or woman would rise to their generation's defense. One of them—and his response can stand for all the rest—was a Yale graduate named John F. Carter, Jr., who, in the summer of 1920, told his side of things in the *Atlantic Monthly*. It was small wonder, Carter maintained, that his contemporaries were so disillusioned and acted so outrageously; look at the shambles of a world that had been passed on to them. But their actions were their own affair and their earned right. "Our music is distinctly barbaric, our girls are distinctly *not* a mixture of arbutus and barbed-wire. We drink when we can and what we can, we gamble, we are extravagant. . ." Variations of Carter's argument would be heard throughout the decade. "Civilizations," wrote Joseph Wood Krutch, as late as 1929, "die from philosophical calm, irony and the sense of fair play quite as surely as they die of debauchery."

The flapper and her sheik took themselves and their rebellion seriously—so seriously that they left themselves open to travesties such as the one perpetrated by Warner Fabian in *Flaming Youth*. (Its author was better known as Samuel Hopkins Adams.) The pseudonymous potboiler, which created a mild flurry when it appeared in 1923, tells of the trials, temptations, and titillations—mostly the latter—of three debutante sisters. It makes hilarious reading, filled as it is with the abandoned stereotypes of Our Dancing Daughters: wild parties, prohibition gin, nude swimming, and sexually emancipated flapper heroines who are (again, in the words of Fitzgerald) "seduced without being ruined." In one notable passage the author discourses on the problem of cultivating the flapper intellect—and, for a moment, *Flaming Youth* comes as close to the truth as young Mr. Carter:

For the most part she elects to be calmly careless, slovenly of speech and manner, or lightly impudent. To have good breeding at call but not to waste it on most people- that is the cachet of her set ... Any book spoken of under the breath has for her the stimulus of a race; she must absorb it first and look knowing and demure when it is mentioned. The age of sex . . . Her standards of casual reading are of like degree; she considers Town Topics [a notorious society scandal sheet] an important chronicle and Vanity Fair a symposium of pure intellect .

. . . She hardly knows the names of the great scientists. . . . she doubtless would identify Lister as one who achieved fame by inventing a mouth wash. However, she could at once tell you the name of the fashionable physician to go to for a nervous breakdown . . . From what Pat indicates of the tittle-tattle of ingenues' luncheons, it would enlighten Rabelais and shock Pepys!

Meanwhile the flapper was growing older, the party was getting wilder, and her demands were no longer so innocent as those of the teen-age Isabelles. It was her mission to carry the dare beyond girlhood. At the end of *Flaming Youth* the heroine's eyes darken, brood, dream, and grow prophetic as she warns her fiance and recent seducer, "But, oh Gary, darling! ... As a husband you'll have to be a terribly on-the-job lover. There are so many men in the world!"

Could history possibly repeat?

This article is part of an anthology on the twenties edited by Robert and Malcolm Cowley. The book will be published by Scribner's

Cowley01EN