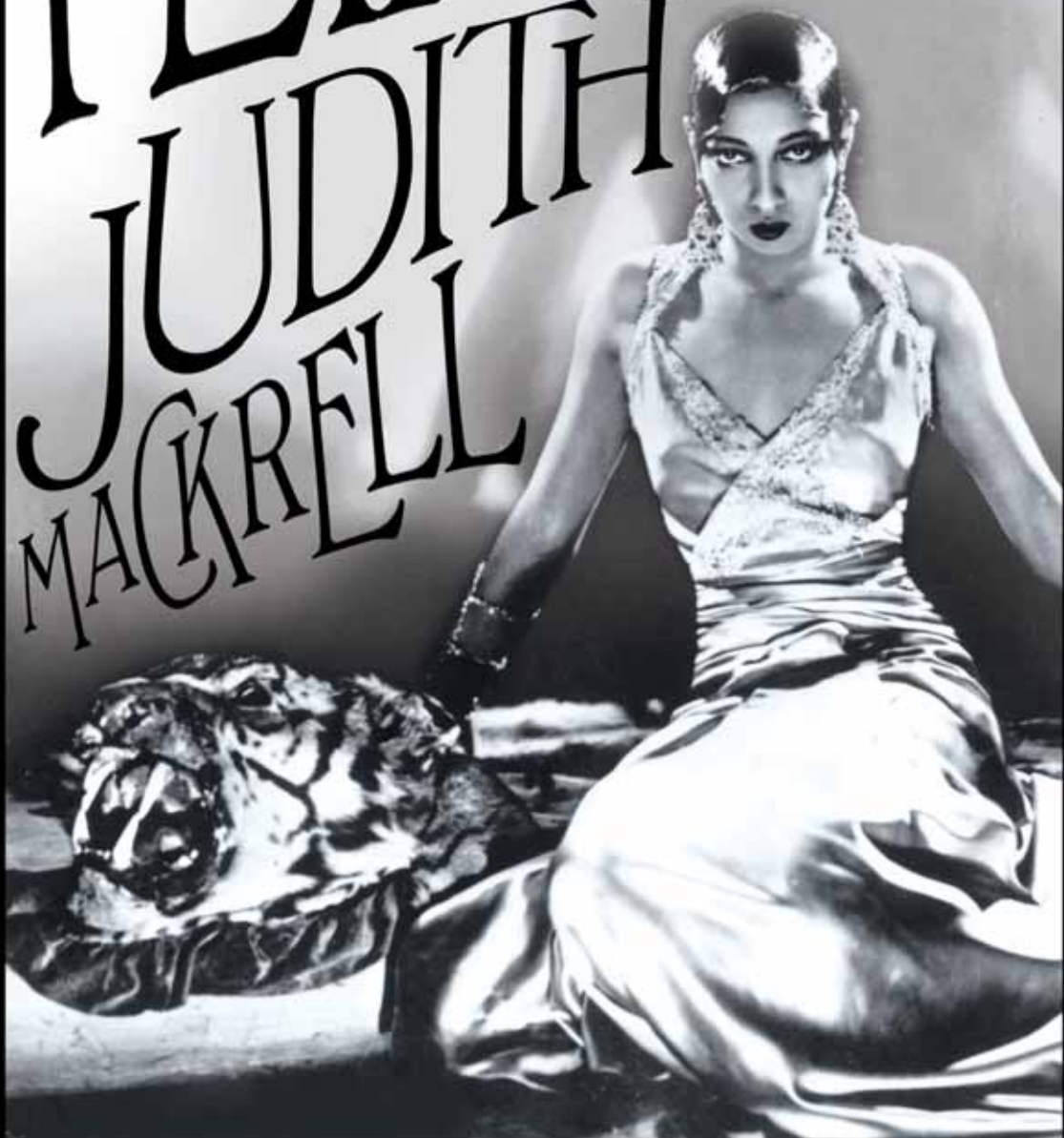


SIX WOMEN OF A DANGEROUS GENERATION

FLAPPERS

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Chapter One

DIANA



Two months after Britain went to war against Germany Lady Diana Manners was being chauffeured across London towards Guy's Hospital and her new vocation as a volunteer nurse. It was barely four miles from her family's Mayfair home to the hospital in Southwark, yet Diana was conscious that, to her distraught mother sitting in the car beside her, it was a journey into the wilderness.

During tearfully protracted arguments Diana had tried to convince her mother that enlisting as a VAD (member of the Voluntary Aid Detachment) was not a lone, wilful act. Among the thousands of women who were queuing to serve their country, a number were Diana's own friends, and some were volunteering for much more arduous duties: driving ambulances, working in munitions factories or nursing at the Front.

Yet to the Duchess of Rutland, the idea of her daughter working in one of London's public hospitals, making tea and washing patients, was barely less squalid than her volunteering to walk the streets as a prostitute. As the family Rolls-Royce crossed Southwark Bridge and began to nose its way through grimy cobbled streets, jostled by crowds, assailed by smells from the docks and from the piles of festering rubbish, the Duchess's worst fears seemed justified. Years later Diana could still recall the detail of that stiff, silent drive. The dark drizzle spattering

against the car's windscreen; the stricken expression on her mother's face; the momentary faltering of her own courage as they pulled up outside the gaunt, grey façade of Guy's.

It was not a welcoming scene. A huddle of nurses was crossing the wide courtyard, heads bowed against the blustery wind, skirts whipped around their legs. Equally drear was the expression worn by the elderly housekeeper as she opened the door and led the way silently upstairs to the room where Diana was to sleep. There was nothing as frivolous as a full-length mirror among its bare furnishings, yet as she changed into her nurse's uniform the look in her mother's eyes told Diana that, to the Duchess at least, she appeared hideous.

She felt guilty at the pain she was causing, but she was exhilarated, too. Even though the collar of her mauve and white striped dress was starched to a punitive stiffness and the coarse, regulation cotton felt harsh after the chiffon and silk to which she was accustomed, these discomforts brought a sense of transformation. When Diana tied her shoelaces and tightened her belt it was with the knowledge that for the first time in twenty-two years she was asserting some control over her life.

Apart from the death of her older brother Haddon when she was two, and the misery of being confined to bed when she was ten by a rare form of muscular atrophy,* Diana had known little beyond family parties, seaside holidays and servants whilst growing up. But there were constraints as well as privileges. Her family's expectation that she would marry into money and rank required the dowry of an unblemished reputation, and even when she regarded herself as adult, every hour of her waking life remained, theoretically, under scrutiny. She wasn't permitted to spend a night away from home, except at the house parties of approved friends; she wasn't supposed to walk by herself in the street, nor dine alone with a man. She'd developed a hundred ways of dodging her chaperones and keeping certain activities

* It was probably bulbar paralysis, known then as Erb's disease.

secret, yet such deceit had long ceased to be amusing. It was simply demeaning.

Life at Guy's would be very hard, with long days of menial drudgery hedged around with dozens of petty restrictions. But still it spelled deliverance. Not only would Diana be living away from home for the first time, but during her precious off-duty hours she would be free to do what she wanted and see whom-ever she chose.

This hunger for independence was shared by many of the other 46,000 British women who signed up to become VADs,* and by millions of others around the world. When the European powers declared war they inadvertently held out to women a momentous promise of freedom. The American journalist Mabel Potter Daggett spoke too optimistically and too soon when she declared, 'We may write it down in history that on August 4, 1914 the door of the Doll's House opened', but for many that was the great expectation and the hope.¹

In Britain, the flood of recruits to the Volunteer Aid Detachment was a phenomenon of enormous interest to the press, with stories and photographs of the richest and most beautiful regularly featured in society columns. And Diana would rapidly become one of the most prominent. She seemed to the public to be practically a princess, having been born to one of the oldest families in Britain (the Rutland title dated back to 1525, the Crawford title on her mother's side to 1398), and also to one of the richest. In 1906, when her father, Sir Henry Manners, had inherited his dukedom, he took possession not only of thousands of acres of land, but of country houses, farms, coal mines and dozens of entire villages.

The idea of Diana emerging from this palatial life to nurse the poor and wounded was enormously appealing to the British, and throughout the war she was showcased in many, mistily sentimental press photos. D.W. Griffiths featured her in his 1918

* VAD's weren't paid until 1916, when the rising toll of casualties necessitated a doubling in the number of nurses, and wages became a necessary inducement to attract working women.

propaganda film *Hearts of the World* because, he said, she was ‘the most beloved woman in England’;² she was enshrined in a wartime adaptation of the music-hall song ‘Burlington Bertie’ with the lines, ‘I’ll eat a banana/With Lady Diana/Aristocracy working at Guys.’

Yet even more fascinating to the public than Diana’s ancestry was her life as a socialite. Ever since she had come out as a debutante in 1910, the suppers and nightclubs she attended, the outfits she wore and the amusing chitchat attributed to her were regularly reported in magazines like *The Lady* and in the gossip columns of the press. Her reputation extended far beyond London: the *Aberdeen Journal* confidently informed its readers that ‘no fancy dress ball was complete without the presence of Lady Diana’ and across the Atlantic, the *New York American* described her as a necessary embellishment to smart and artistic circles.³

Diana’s originality, her perceived cleverness and beauty were all that her mother Violet had hoped for. Despite her public commitment to family tradition, the Duchess had artistic, almost bohemian instincts, which she had passed on to her daughters. If Diana, in 1914, was restless for a life beyond her allotted destiny, it was her mother who was partly responsible.

As a young woman Violet had been a willowy beauty, the dark, pooling intensity of eyes and the pale auburn cloud of her hair lending her a dreamy, otherworldly distinction. She was sympathetic to the Aesthetic movement in dress, disdaining the elaboration of bustles and puffed sleeves for a simpler style of gown, and affecting a Romantic spontaneity, with lace scarves fluttering at her neck and wrists, posies of wild flowers pinned to her waist, the family tiara worn back to front to hold up her mass of hair. She was clever about the things that concerned her. As a key member of a group of late nineteenth-century intellectuals, nicknamed ‘the Souls’*, Violet talked about art and berated the

* Their membership included artists, writers and politicians, including Lord Curzon, Arthur Balfour, Alfred Lyttelton and George Frederic Watts.

philistinism of the Victorian age. She was also much admired for her own amateur gifts, with several of her busts and her silver-point and pencil portraits exhibited in London galleries.

A reputation for being different, even mildly rebellious, had attached itself to her. While Violet deferred to the formal duties of a Duke's wife, she clearly preferred intimate suppers to grand dinners and court events. More subversively still she counted actors like Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree and his wife Maud among her intimate friends. Even at the beginning of the twentieth century, this was odd behaviour for a duchess. However elevated the Trees might be within their profession, they were still theatre people, whose circle had included the scandalous Oscar Wilde. Lord and Lady Salisbury, who lived one door away from the Manners' London home, in Arlington Street, were certainly wary of moral contagion. They refused to let their children visit the house, because of the 'foreign actresses and people like that' who might be encountered there.⁴

In the raising of her three daughters – Marjorie, Violet (Letty) and Diana – Violet also raised eyebrows: she took the girls on regular trips to the London theatre and encouraged in them a precocious independence of spirit. Diana, the youngest, had been born in August 1892 and for several years had been a plain, but interestingly fanciful child. She'd imagined herself a 'necromancer', filling her bedroom with bottles that were 'coloured and crusted with incandescent sediment from elixiral experiments',⁵ and because her mother liked 'only the beautiful in everything'⁶ she'd been encouraged in her fancies. The governesses who'd educated Diana and her sisters (their brother John was sent off to boarding school) had been instructed to skip over 'commonplace' subjects like mathematics and geography and focus instead on poetry, singing, embroidery and art.

History was also favoured, especially family history, and from childhood Diana's imagination had been shaped by stories of her ancestral past and by the imposing enchantment of Belvoir Castle, the Rutland family home. From early childhood she had

played among its castellated towers and labyrinthine passages, its vaulted roomfuls of Gobelin tapestries and Dutch paintings.* She had grown up inside a privileged kingdom, buffered by centuries of entitlement. And despite the romantic informality of Violet's influence, the amateur theatricals she organized, the artistic guests she entertained, Diana and her siblings knew both the glamour and the burden of feeling themselves to be a breed apart.

By the time she approached her fourteenth birthday Diana had developed into a pretty, spirited teenager, and the clarity of her pale skin and large blue eyes promised she might even become beautiful. That summer she was invited to holiday in Norfolk with the Beerbohm Trees and their three daughters; to her joy, a group of Oxford students were also staying in the same village. Maud and Herbert tolerantly gave permission for shared suppers and picnics, and for three weeks Diana revelled in the company of these clever, good-looking boys. There were games, quizzes and flirtations, during which she 'showed off madly', and she slipped out to the chemist for a bottle of peroxide to bleach her hair a silvery gold. Even though she felt she was 'spinning plates' in her desperate need to impress, she knew that among these boys she had found her *métier*.

Afterwards she wrote to one of them: 'Brancaster was heavenly, wasn't it. I nearly cried when I left. Do for pity's sake let's all meet again soon . . . When one makes friends, I think one ought to go on being friends hard and not let it drop.'⁷ Further letters were exchanged, there were meetings in the houses of mutual acquaintances and Diana, who had always been so passionately attached to family and home, now hugged to herself the knowledge that she had acquired a circle of her own friends. 'I wanted first to be loved, and next I wanted to be clever,' she recalled, and to make herself worthy of her boys she began

* Much of the castle had been recently rebuilt but to Diana, visiting her grandparents there before it passed on to her father, Belvoir seemed ancient.

begging her mother for lessons in Greek and music,* while alone in her bedroom she practised clever, romantic bon mots in front of her mirror.⁸

Inspired by vanity and hope, she matured fast. There were appalling blanks in her knowledge (it was left to Iris Tree, four years her junior, to give her the most basic instruction in the facts of life), yet Diana's brain was teeming with poetry, impressions and ideas, and sometimes she could appear obnoxiously forward. One evening, playing after-dinner guessing games with her mother's friends, she grew impatient with the slowness of one of the players. 'Use your brain, Mr Balfour; use your *brain*,' she snapped at him.⁹ He was the former prime minister and she was about fifteen.

When Diana met Vita Sackville-West at a country house party, she desperately envied the older girl for her literary talent. 'She is an aristocrat, rollingly rich, who writes French poetry with more ease than I lie on a sofa.'¹⁰ Feeling that she had no extraordinary gifts of her own, she aimed instead to develop an extraordinary style. At Belvoir she painted her bedroom walls black to contrast with her crimson bedspread; she made artful groupings of candles, religious paintings and dried flowers; she also transformed her clothes. In 1907 'all things Greek' were in fashion, and dutifully Diana experimented with sandals and draperies, pinning a silver crescent moon in her hair. Dissatisfied with the appearance of her naked feet she tugged hopefully at her second toe, attempting to induce a more 'Grecian' length. Her new bible was *L'Art et la Mode*, the French magazine to which her sisters subscribed, whose pages were filled with the revolutionary designs of Paul Poiret and Mariano Fortuny.

With a yearning intentness, she studied pictures of languid female models, their fascinatingly uncorseted bodies draped in silks and diaphanous gowns. She thrilled to the element of

* She also took a short course in Italian and German at the Berlitz language school, to groom her into 'une petite fille modèle'.

theatre in Poiret and Fortuny's clothes, their jewel-bright colours and suggestive flavour of the Orient. Most British girls her age were still aspiring to the fresh and curvy style of the Gibson Girl – hair piled high, waist cinched tight to emphasize a full bosom – but Diana was determined that her new adult self should be far more avant-garde.

Around this time her mother was visited by the playwright Henri Bernstein and his companion Princess Murat. Diana was entranced by the Princess and her stories of sophisticated French society, which were 'totally different from anything we knew',¹¹ and she was even more entranced by her wardrobe. Obliging, the Princess allowed Diana to examine her Fortuny dresses, created from brilliantly coloured, exquisitely pleated silk that shimmered to the touch. But what Diana coveted most was the Princess's Poiret-designed tunic, and she was determined to make a copy. It was a simple enough design for Diana's school-room sewing skills, and the result was so successful that she made others to sell to her friends, each with a different trim of ribbon, braid or fur. It proved to be a profitable enterprise and Diana squirrelled away the cash she earned: despite the family's ancestral wealth, the Manners children received no pocket money of their own.

Diana continued adding to her wardrobe, designing clothes that were sometimes eccentrically experimental, but to her eyes rivetingly modish. As she refashioned her appearance, however, she became self-consciously critical of her figure. These new fluid fashions from Europe were liberating women from the corset, but they followed the line of the body so closely that they imposed a new tyranny. 'Banting' or 'slenderizing' were becoming de rigueur, and when Diana studied herself in the mirror she despaired at the 'round, white, slow, lazy and generally . . . unappetising blancmange' she saw reflected there.¹²

Edwardian Britain was collectively embracing the idea of physical fitness. Cycling, golf, tennis and bathing were much in vogue, part of the brisk tempo of the new century, but Diana's regime of self-improvement was unusually strenuous. She went

for long runs around the grounds of Belvoir, jigged furiously to the gramophone – a precious acquisition given to her by the opera singer Dame Nellie Melba – and pounded away at an old punch bag. The following year she discovered a more creative discipline in dancing. London was newly inspired by Isadora Duncan, the radical American dancer who had become as famous for performing barefoot and uncorseted as she had become for the unfettered, expressive beauty of her movements. Feminism, fashion and the theatre all reflected Duncan's influence, and it was to a performance of one of her many imitators, Maud Allan, that Violet took Diana in 1908.

This was, in many ways, an odd choice for a mother and daughter outing, given the rumours that circulated around Allan, about her past career as a lingerie model, about her publication of a sex manual and about her many lovers, male and female. In addition, the solo she was dancing in London, *The Vision of Salome*, was a work of quite blatant eroticism. Wearing little but a transparent harem skirt and jewel-encrusted breast-plate, Allan portrayed the seductive powers of her heroine with a sensuality that was advertised as more shocking than anything seen on the London stage. Publicity pamphlets circulated by the Palace Theatre promised a performance of unbridled passion: 'desire . . . perverse and amoral flames from her eyes and bursts in hot gusts from her scarlet mouth'; her body undulates 'like a silver snake eager for its prey'.¹³

Most deviant would be the climactic scene in which Allan toyed with the severed head of John the Baptist, kissing it slowly and lasciviously on the lips. To some viewers Allan was nothing more than a burlesque dancer with artistic pretensions, but to others she was a potent cultural force. The latest in a line of Salome interpreters – following on from Oscar Wilde's play and Richard Strauss's opera – she was regarded as a beautifully perverse and amoral rebuttal of Victorian prudery. To her many thousands of female fans she offered an intoxicatingly public representation of their sexuality.

In Edwardian Britain, certainly in the world that Diana

inhabited, the eroticism of women remained discreetly masked – the theories of Havelock Ellis had yet to be widely read and Marie Stopes’s revelatory advice on love and orgasm had yet to be written. For those who knew, or suspected themselves of sharing, Allan’s liberated tastes, it was nearly impossible to declare themselves. While lesbians were technically not outside the law (Queen Victoria had refused to believe that women could be lovers, and never approved a law to criminalize female homosexuality) it was difficult, even dangerous, for them to reveal their sexual preference in public.

Allan’s Salome, a woman brazenly in control of her own desires, became a coded rallying point. Women staged private parties in which they dressed up and danced in imitation of Allan’s voluptuous style (the male orchestras accompanying them remained discreetly hidden behind potted palms). When an American commentator noted that Allan had encouraged a dangerous tendency towards ‘bohemianism and dancing in London’, his more knowing readers picked up the sexual subtext – Margot Asquith, wife of the prime minister, was rumoured to be one of Allan’s lovers. A decade later, when an extreme right-wing politician, Noel Pemberton Billing, embarked on a crusade to expose degenerate and unpatriotic elements within the British aristocracy, he accused Allan of spreading ‘The Cult of the Clitoris’ among the nation’s women.

The Duchess was certainly not part of that cult, nor would she hear talk of it. As a general rule she shrank from anything she considered vulgar; when she suspected her oldest daughter Marjorie of using cosmetics (still frowned on before the war) she could not even bring herself to utter the word rouge, merely touching her finger interrogatively to her daughter’s cheek. In art, however, Violet saw only beauty. And when she encouraged Diana to return to Allan’s performances she was simply imagining her daughter being inspired to imitate Allan’s expressive grace.

Diana was eager to try, and the following year she enrolled in

classes to study Russian folk dance and classical ballet.* The unfamiliar discipline made her legs ache and her toes hurt, but she liked the new alertness of her body, and most of all the slender shape it was acquiring. By 1911 she had acquired the confidence to pose semi-naked for her brother John, who was a keen amateur photographer. Although she had her back to the camera, the mirror held up to her face plainly revealed her identity. Diana Manners, looking slender, elegant and defiantly self-possessed.

Diana's programme of self-improvement was yielding results, but the world around her was proving harder to shape to her imagination. By the time she'd reached seventeen she'd become furiously irritated by her childish status: she could not yet put up her hair, go to dances, or see any of her friends without the elaborate organization of parents or governesses. Her Oxford boys were graduating into the real world, and Diana's longing to join them was inscribed over and over again in her diary: 'Only one year before I'll be out – and – out OUT.'¹⁴

But coming 'out' did not provide the excitement she'd hoped for. The 1910 season was unusually muted, as the death of King Edward VII led to a suspension of court functions, including the formal presentation of debutantes.[†] Far more disappointing, however, were the people in whose company Diana found herself, during what proved to be a very long and very dull summer.

Most of her fellow debutantes were raw, shy girls: 'innocent of powder . . . deplorably dressed, with their shapeless wispy hair held by crooked combs'.¹⁵ Most of the young men before whom they were being paraded as possible wives, seemed to her equally awkward and insipid. Diana's ideal had been formed by the men in her Oxford circle: Alan Parsons, Raymond Asquith and Patrick Shaw Stewart, who were clever, funny and read poetry. None of

* Her teacher was Lydia Kyasht.

[†] It was postponed to the following year.

the Guards officers, viscounts or earls with whom she danced that summer could compare.

Neither did they come close to inspiring the rapture Diana experienced when Diaghilev's Ballets Russes came to London the following June. She'd been spellbound by the sinuous choreography and haunting music of works like *Scheherazade* and by the blazing colour of Léon Bakst's stage designs: here at least, she felt, the world aligned itself with her most brilliant imaginings. In 1912, when she saw the Russian opera, led by the majestic singing of Feodor Chaliapin, it was as if 'comets whizzed across the unfamiliar sky, the stars danced'.¹⁶

That summer, too, Diana discovered another kind of theatre. She and her mother were in Venice and had become acquainted with the fabulously rich and eccentric Marchesa Luisa Casati. The Marchesa lived in a curious, low palazzo* on the Grand Canal, surrounded by a darkly overgrown garden and a menagerie of animals; and the extravagant style in which she held court was, for Diana, a 'glorious shock'¹⁷ to her imagination.

When she and the Duchess were invited to their first party at the palazzo, they were ferried there in one of Casati's gondolas. A pair of near-naked slaves met them on arrival, one throwing oil onto a brazier to send a flare of greeting into the night sky, the other ringing a massive gong. Casati, a modern Medusa with a death-white mask of powder and red, hennaed curls, was also waiting on the Palazzo terrace. Posing with statuesque grace in the middle of an enormous bowl of tuberoses, she silently handed a waxen flower to each guest in turn.

After the predictable formalities of English entertaining, this decadent spectacle was miraculous to Diana. It was everything for which she had hungered whilst drinking fruit cup and dancing quadrilles during her season. Yet even London was finally beginning to catch up with her fantasies. There were

* The Palazzo Venier dei Leoni; it was later bought by Peggy Guggenheim and is now the Venice Guggenheim Museum.

changes stirring in the city, a breath of cosmopolitan energy that came with the first exhibition of post-impressionist paintings, with the radical psychoanalytic theories of Sigmund Freud, and, infinitely more exciting to Diana, the appearance of a new kind of nightclub.

The Cave of the Golden Calf, a tiny basement just off Regent Street, fashionably decorated with Ballets Russes-inspired murals, was one of several establishments that opened in 1912 that offered a doorway to the modern world. Negro bands played music that was alive with the exoticism of America – the honking stridency of St Louis; the twang of the plantation South; the yearning echo of the blues. Cocktails such as Pink Ladies were served and women were not only encouraged to drink openly, but to wear lipstick, gamble and smoke. Diana was in her element. She might have had to bribe or trick her chaperone of the evening, but once inside the smoky darkness, she felt free. Crowded onto the dance floor of a club she could abandon herself to the rhythms of the Turkey Trot or Grizzly Bear, rag-time dances that jerked invisible wires inside her body, made her hips sway and her cheeks flush. Skirts were being worn shorter this season, a few inches from the floor, and as Diana danced she noted with pride the discreet flash of her own silk-stockinged ankles.

She was equally proud of her new expertise as a smoker, although like many women she was addicted less to the head rush of nicotine than to the elegance of her cigarette holder – an accessory designed to prevent flecks of tobacco catching on painted lips, yet ripe with the flirtatious possibilities of a fan. Late at night, when the sky was just beginning to lighten and Diana drove home in a taxi with one of her admirers, the driver would often be instructed to take a detour, as she very decorously allowed herself to be kissed.

Such activities would have been considered distressingly compromising by Violet – and that, for Diana, was largely the point. Her desire to become ‘incomparable’ was no longer coloured by her mother’s standards; she wanted to be bold and bad – ‘Unlike-

Other-People'.¹⁸ As she remembered it, 'There was a general new look in everything in those years before the first war – a Poiret-Bakst blazon and a budding freedom of behaviour that was breaking out at the long last end of Victorianism. We felt it and revelled in it.'¹⁹

On the nights that Diana was able to escape her chaperones there was not only dancing in the Golden Calf, but illegal, moonlit swims in the Serpentine or the Thames; expeditions to pubs in the Limehouse docks and the occasional weaving ride on the back of a motorbike. Her new sacred texts were by Aubrey Beardsley, Baudelaire, Oscar Wilde and Max Beerbohm, and on their inspiration, she and her friends began calling themselves, with only a hint of irony, the Corrupt Coterie. They coveted new sensations and transgressive ideas whilst affecting a style of cynicism and profanity: 'Our pride was to be unafraid of words, unshocked by drink and unashamed of "decadence" and gambling.'²⁰

In reality much of the Coterie's behaviour was little more than cultivated naughtiness. They invented after-dinner games, like Breaking the News – acting out scenes in which well-known women were informed of the deaths of their children. They staged exhibitionist stunts: Denis Anson faked epileptic fits; Maurice Baring set his hair alight during games of Risk; while Diana herself braved official censure by attending a formal reception at the Duke of Westminster's with a set of fake medals pinned mockingly to her dress.

These mild acts of rebellion, however, brought a euphoric sense of daring and also a degree of public notoriety. The fact that several members of the Coterie had eminent parents made them very interesting to the press, and Lady Diana Manners was most interesting of all. Inwardly she might feel herself to be a 'blancmange', unable to match the cleverness and originality of her friends, but outwardly she seemed to scintillate. In a roomful of people it was Diana who held the floor in after-dinner games of charades or parentage, who galvanized everybody into

impromptu dances to the gramophone, who scattered smart nonsense around the conversation.

People vied to secure her for their parties, because she was a guaranteed source of fun, and because she had also become beautiful, tall and very slender now, with a classical oval face and a dreamily opaque gaze (actually a consequence of mild short-sightedness) that was offset by her extreme social animation. When the writer Enid Bagnold first saw her descending a flight of stairs and sweeping the room with her 'blind blue stare' she recalled being 'shocked – in the sense of electricity'.²¹ To young admirers who sent love letters and queued up to dance, Diana was 'a goddess', 'an orchid among cowslips'. Older men were no less susceptible. One of her suitors was the legendarily wealthy American financier George Gordon Moore, who insisted that on a word from Diana he would divorce his wife. He seemed to move 'in a shower of gold', courting her with such astonishing presents as an ermine coat, a gigantic sapphire (reputed to have belonged to Catherine the Great), even a pet monkey called Armide with a diamond waist belt and chain.²²

Diana thrived on both the presents and her notoriety. In response to an ironic marriage proposal from Duff Cooper, she described herself proudly as 'very decadent, and theatrical & inclined to look fast – attributes no man likes in his wife'.²³ She was also beginning to attract malicious comment. Those who remained insulated against her electricity criticized Diana as a flirt and 'a scalp hunter', and she received anonymous letters accusing her of corrupting the young men around her.

In truth, Diana had remained far more chaste in her behaviour than some of her peers. The publication in 1909 of H.G. Wells's novel *Anne Veronica* had highlighted a trend among advanced young women to regard their virginity as a vexing encumbrance to adulthood. When the twenty-two-year-old Enid Bagnold allowed herself to be seduced by the writer Frank Harris, in 1909, she was delirious with relief. The painter Nina Hamnett wanted a plaque to be mounted on the house where

she lost her own virginity. But if Diana was more cautious, she was also a far more public personality than these women. And in early 1914 the backlash against her supposed bad behaviour gathered momentum when the Coterie suffered its first brush with death. Gustav Hamel, a Swedish amateur flyer and racing driver who was close to the group, crashed his private plane during a flight from France to London. Shortly afterwards Denis Anson was drowned in the Thames during a late-night swimming party. 'Mad youth' was blamed by the press for both fatalities, and it was Diana who was identified as the prime instigator.

The report of Anson's funeral appeared under the headline DIANA'S LOVE, and rumours spread through London that both Denis and Gustav had died while showing off for her benefit. Diana, already grief-stricken, suffered her first frightening experience of social rejection. Her name was dropped from the list for that summer's Guards Ball,²⁴ and people who had known her since childhood joined in the general condemnation. Lady Desborough, the mother of her friends Julian and Billy Grenfell, refused for a time to have her in her house, and Margot Asquith was loud in condemning her as a heartless flirt.

All this was very alarming for the Duchess. Over two years had passed since Diana's season, and she was increasingly anxious about her youngest daughter's prospects. The acceptable gap dividing youth from awkward spinsterhood was a narrow one, and it was intolerable to Violet that Diana might be seen to be unmarriedable. She still held unswervingly to the belief that wedlock was a woman's sole source of security. If Diana could marry well and produce the necessary son and heir, she would then be free to embark on whatever private projects and love affairs she chose. Sir Henry had not been Violet's own great love, nor she his: in accordance with centuries of upper-class pragmatism the two had discreetly found passion outside their marriage, Sir Henry with his mistresses and his fly fishing; Violet with her lover Harry Cust.

This cultured, handsome man, 'the Rupert Brooke of our day' according to Lady Horner, had for several years been the adored

centre of Violet's universe.²⁵ She saw him in the late afternoon, when she could claim to be paying social calls. And constricted though the affair was, it had suited Violet well, allowing her to compartmentalize her life between duty and love. Such a balance, she assumed, would work equally for Diana as it would for her two other daughters. Both Letty and Marjorie had already found satisfactory husbands: Ego Charteris, son of the Earl of Wemyss, and Charlie Paget, now Marquess of Anglesey. Diana was the most beautiful of the three – Prince Paul of Yugoslavia had paid court to her, as had Lord Rocksavage – and Violet believed she could secure the most brilliant match of all. The Prince of Wales might be nearly three years younger than Diana, but a long engagement was always possible. Within the royal family itself there was enthusiasm for the match, for Diana's popularity was regarded as a potentially useful asset to the throne. As for Violet, she couldn't think of anyone who might make a more beautiful future Queen.

Yet Diana seemed uninterested in anyone but her own close circle, none of whom Violet counted as brilliant matches, and anxiety made the Duchess more vigilant and critical than she intended. The rule of the chaperone was a fact of life for all respectable unmarried women – even those sufficiently independent to attend university were not permitted into public lectures on their own – but Diana believed her own levels of confinement were absurd. The only hotel she was permitted to enter was the Ritz, which was just around the corner from the family's London home. Every night the Duchess kept her bedroom door open to monitor the hour at which Diana returned, and the following day she expected an account of whom her daughter had danced with, who had accompanied her and who had driven her home.

Diana loved her mother, but her patience was running out, and by now she had acquired a piece of knowledge that made the Duchess's vigilance look absurdly hypocritical. She had been eighteen when Edward Horner blundered into telling her the truth about her mother's affair with Harry Cust and, even more startlingly, let slip that Harry was widely assumed to be Diana's

biological father. The physical evidence was compelling, Diana's fair colouring and the shape of her face suggested a clear genetic resemblance, and once Diana was confronted with it she claimed to accept the revelation with barely a struggle. She had always liked Harry, and insisted that she found it amusing to think of herself a 'Living Monument of Incontinence'.²⁶

Yet it was still a shock, and it left her feeling more distanced, more questioning and more restless for escape. She was by then just twenty-two. A day could still be made 'iridescent', 'intoxicating' by a new dress or a ragtime tune, she could still relish the satisfaction of love letters, compliments and press cuttings. Yet beneath it all she felt the 'grim monotony'²⁷ of a life where she remained as financially dependent and physically constrained as a child. It left her with a vague and discomfiting ennui that she couldn't even name, let alone address.

The notion that there might be some larger political context to her dissatisfaction was entirely foreign to Diana. As a child, she'd declared herself fervently grateful to have been born a girl because 'somebody will always look after me'.²⁸ As an adult she felt no identification with the suffragettes who had faced prison, even death, in their battle for the vote. At best she pitied them, at worse she mocked. During a country house party, Diana and her cousin Angie Manners staged the 'hilarious' stunt of dressing up in the purple, white and green colours of the WSPU, climbing on top of a garden gazebo and pelting male onlookers with cardboard biscuit boxes. Yet for all her political apathy, Diana would probably have concurred with the feminist Agatha Evans that there was a grim predictability in the lives of women who were 'required to be gorgeous decorative and dumb' while seeking husbands, and thereafter condemned to be 'married matronly and motherly'.²⁹

There were exceptions: Diana's own mother was hardly matronly: some of the richer, more ambitious hostesses she encountered, such as the Marchesa Casati, Lady Cunard, or Lady Ripon, wielded some considerable social power. Perhaps if Diana had found a husband to suit both herself and her mother

she might have become another Lady Ripon, a patron to the Russian ballet, or hostess to some of the key cultural circles in London. But in August 1914, Britain went to war and Diana, along with the rest of the population, found her life and expectations thrown drastically off course.

She had been horrified and taken off guard by the declaration of war. Cocooned among her own small concerns she'd paid little attention to the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, in June, nor understood its effect on Europe's political fault lines. She was far less well informed than the twenty-year-old undergraduate, Vera Brittain, who pondered fearfully in her diary what a modern war would be like: 'Attack is possible by earth, water & air & the destruction attainable by the modern war machines used by the armies is unthinkable and past imagination'.³⁰ And she knew much less than the crowd of women who flocked to London's Kingsway Hall to denounce the war as the product of male rapacity and aggression.

But while Diana hoped that war might still be averted (naively wondering if the Coterie's most influential friends might persuade Asquith to organize an international peace treaty), she couldn't help but thrill to the enormity of this new drama and its liberating possibilities. Her first instinct had been to volunteer as a nurse in one of the Red Cross field hospitals close to the battle lines. Sentimentally, she cherished the idea of being near her male friends, who were already signing up for officer training. Competitively, she was determined not to be outdone by others she knew who were planning to nurse in France – among them Rosemary Leveson-Gower, who was engaged to her brother John, and her cousin Angie. And romantically, she believed she would have the adventure of her life.

Violet, however, was adamant in her refusal. She had never fully recovered from the death of Haddon, her first and most beloved child, and she could not countenance any threat to Diana. She was convinced her daughter would end up raped and left for dead by drunken soldiers; at the very least she would

be working in appalling conditions. Rumours were already in circulation of the horrors facing young British VADs – one volunteer wrote home of having almost no hot water or light at the Salles Military Hospital in Saumur, and of nursing alongside filthy, disreputable orderlies, most of them soldiers who were ‘too mad or too bad to fight’.³¹ But Diana would not be budged from her determination to volunteer somewhere, so in October, angry, stubborn and wrung out from arguing, she embarked on her new life at Guy’s.

Most recruits found it rigorous. To Diana, coming from the spacious luxury of Belvoir and Arlington Street, it took all her courage to survive the first few days. From six in the morning, when the light bulb above her bed was automatically switched on, to ten fifteen at night, she was obedient to the orders of the professional nurses who patrolled the clattering, sterile wards. No allowances were made for her lack of experience as she disinfected surgical trays and handled bedpans. She was expected to work uncomplainingly through chilblains, swollen ankles, period pains and a level of fatigue she had never experienced before.

She was also thrust straight into the stink and gore of medical emergencies. Diana had tried to prepare herself by going into the kitchen at Arlington Street to watch a hare being eviscerated for the evening meal, but nothing could minimize the trauma of her first patients: a woman who’d had a cancerous tumour sliced out of her chin, another left with a post-operative wound in her side ‘from which a stream of green pus oozed slowly’.³²

For Diana, the challenge of moderating her revulsion was complicated by social factors. She’d had little contact with anyone outside her own class, aside from family servants, and she found it impossible to sympathize with the more self-pitying of her male patients. She had been raised to believe in the virtue of the stiff and stoic upper lip, and to her these clutching, complaining men appeared like ‘whining Calibans’.³³ Yet despite the blinkers of her social prejudice, Diana’s curiosity was captured by Guy’s, with its intriguing mix of official regulation and human messi-

ness. She submitted herself willingly to every petty rule – in contrast to Enid Bagnold who in 1917 would write a swingeingly critical memoir of her time as a VAD and would leave hospital service for the more exhilarating challenge of ambulance driving in France.³⁴ Diana also grew very friendly with some of her fellow nurses and was grateful to be included in their late-night ‘dormy feasts’. The novelty of sharing cigarettes and sweets, of enjoying ‘suppressed songs and laughter’ made her poignantly aware of her restricted upbringing – of all ‘the larks I had missed by never being a schoolgirl’.³⁵

What her mother would have spurned as demeaning or squalid, Diana schooled herself to accept. She discovered surprising reserves of practicality and common sense, and she prided herself on her stoicism, on never taking a day off work except when she was seriously ill, on never fainting during an operation, and on no longer having ‘to turn away from repulsive things’.³⁶ When Arnold Bennett caricatured her in his 1918 novel *The Pretty Lady* as the neurotic self-promoting do-gooder, Lady Queenie Paulle, she felt the insult keenly, believing that she had genuinely been of service as a nurse, and that she’d genuinely been changed by the experience.

The most prized aspect of her new life, however, was the autonomy it brought. Her off-duty periods were sparse – limited to three evenings a week and the occasional weekend – yet she was able to spend all of them with her friends, who took her out for taxi rides in the park or for dinner in the one restaurant in Southwark they considered decent. On those precious evenings when she ‘flew’ out of the hospital at five minutes past eight, ‘painted and powdered and dressed (as I hoped) to kill’,³⁷ the knowledge that the Duchess had no idea what she was doing or with whom gave these modest but unchaperoned outings a beguiling enchantment.

Not only did Diana feel purposeful and in control, but for the first time she knew herself to be part of some larger, more collective experience. Women’s lives were changing, both for those like her, who had volunteered to become VADS, and for

the new female workforce that was starting to tackle jobs and professions left vacant by Britain's enlisting soldiers. It was a slow trajectory, but gradually women were moving beyond the menial or domestic labour that had been their traditional employment*. By the end of the war nearly two million would have proved themselves as bus drivers, glaziers, bank clerks and cashiers, motorcycle couriers, railway porters, tree cutters, farmers, stage managers, librarians, engineers, policewomen and teachers.†

In ways that couldn't have been foreseen by the suffragettes, the war represented an astonishing moment for women to challenge their status as the weaker, decorative sex. Ethel M. Billborough, an affluent young Englishwoman, would write in July 1915, 'Now everyone is living and no mistake about it; there is no more playing at things.'³⁸ Violet, however, remained miserably resistant to this change. She hated the idea of her daughter working in so starkly uncongenial a place as Guy's, and since Diana showed no signs of returning home, she embarked on a plan to manoeuvre her back, by overseeing the conversion of their London house into an officers' hospital.[‡] Other private homes were being given over to similar use, and 16 Arlington Street was certainly one of the most commodious in London. Even with the family still in residence, its ballroom and prettily gilded drawing room would be large enough to convert to a pair of twelve- and ten-bedded wards, while the Duchess's own bed-

* At first the war was bad for working women: 14 per cent of those already employed lost their jobs with the closing down of peacetime industries. There was also sentimental resistance to the idea of women tackling men's work, which was only dispelled when compulsory military service was introduced in 1917 and it was clear the nation couldn't function without them.

† When the Endell Street military hospital opened in 1916, it was with an all-female staff of doctors as well as nurses. Even on the front line women proved their remarkable qualities: nurses refused to leave their patients, even under heavy fire; Edith Cavell became a national heroine after being executed by the Germans for helping soldiers escape from German-occupied Brussels to the safety of Holland.

‡ The Duchess's first plan, financially backed by Moore, had been to convert a French chateau into a private hospital, but it had not been approved by the Red Cross.

room could serve as an operating theatre while she removed to a smaller room. Diana had only been at Guy's for six months before her mother offered her a perfectly kitted out and very comfortable alternative.

She felt a profound ambivalence towards this latest instance of her mother's manipulation. Even though the hospital was being run by professionals, it still had an irksome, Marie Antoinettish quality. As she later wrote, 'Hospital life kids one into thinking one is indispensable and home life after it is wanton and trivial'³⁹. Friends would drop by, bringing chestnut cream cakes and even a bottle of sherry for elevenses – a preposterous contrast to the diet of tinned eggs and stale fish to which she had recently grown accustomed. Aside from traumatic spikes of activity, when a rush of emergency cases was admitted, she was only on duty for an average of five or six hours a day.

On the other hand, moving back home had not resulted in Diana giving up her hard-fought independence: there was too much going on in Arlington Street for Violet to resume her old vigilance. In fact, she was soon to be absent for long periods of time, extending her new-found patriotism to the conversion of Belvoir Castle into an officers' convalescent home. Violet had not yielded her adamantine certainties about propriety and marriage, but even she could see that talk of chaperones was futile in a world where well-brought-up young women were doing the jobs of the working classes, and where young men were being slaughtered at the Front.

During the six months that Diana spent at Guy's, the war had remained a backdrop to her life – almost an abstraction. Her energy was consumed by the demands of nursing and nearly all of the enlisting men she knew were still safely confined to officer training camp. Yet after her return to Arlington Street, as hopes of an early victory faded, the war became horribly real. One by one the lovely, clever boys with whom she had danced, flirted and read poetry were being dispatched to the Front; and one by one they were perishing there. Julian Grenfell, who had thrilled

to the idea of fighting for 'the Old Flag . . . the Mother Country and . . . the Imperial Idea' had died slowly and agonizingly in a dirty field hospital, his brain shattered by a splinter of shell.⁴⁰ Diana's cousin John, and her friends Charles Lister and George Vernon, had also been killed; the last, breaking Diana's heart when she received the farewell note he'd dictated, ending with the painful scrawl he'd been determined to write himself: his initial G and the barely legible 'love'.

At Guy's, Diana had been nursing civilians, but at Arlington Street the carnage of the trenches was literally brought home to her in the maimed and shell-shocked bodies delivered to the wards. Sometimes in the middle of changing a dressing, assisting at an operation, or quieting a patient from his screaming nightmares, Diana would find herself weeping helplessly, unable to bear the senseless misery.

Hours later, however, she would be drinking and dancing. The miseries of war had released a heady fatalism in London, and with it a greed for life. Men might be dying, coal, oil and petrol rationed, food and new clothes in short supply,* yet these were times when it felt like a moral duty to grab at every available pleasure, to party in the face of death.

To Diana it was as though the pleasure-seeking principles of the Corrupt Coterie had acquired a new apocalyptic energy. Every night, as long as there were no emergencies to attend, she went out with friends: those who'd remained in London, and those who were home on leave from the Front. The press still tried to keep track of their doings, and it was with a note of desperation that a columnist would write in September 1916, 'Have you noticed that we have hardly any mention of Lady Diana Manners, Miss Nancy Cunard and their friends? This will never do.'⁴¹ But, in truth, much of their wartime entertainment had to be kept from the papers because it was frankly illegal.

* German naval blockades and the diversion of resources and manpower to the war industries produced a shortage of normal peace-time goods.

One of Diana's favourite haunts was the Cavendish Hotel, a notoriously lax establishment, famous for allowing rackets parties and illicit, after-hours drinking. Frequent police raids were made on the Cavendish and on more than one night, Diana had to hide outside in the back garden until the coast was clear. She came even closer to scandal in December 1915, when she was caught drinking brandy at Kettner's Restaurant after 10.30 p.m.; she was saved from prosecution only by her friend Alan Parsons 'having a word' with Sir Edward Henry, Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, who promised the 'matter would go no further'.⁴²

She knew her behaviour was risky, but she found it addictive: the exhilaration of being 'dangerous, dissipated, desperate' kept the nightmares of war at bay.⁴³ In 1916 she was at an exceptionally louche party given by an American actor, and was delighted by the reaction of Duff Cooper, who bumped into her there. Duff was shocked to see her in a room full of 'the lowest kind of actress and chorus girls', and he thought she was 'probably the only virgin' present.⁴⁴ But for Diana, his discomfort only enhanced the pleasure of going slumming; carelessly she said she'd wanted to see how low she could go 'without losing caste'.⁴⁵

The most extravagant expression of this wartime hedonism was seen in the parties that George Gordon Moore started to host for Diana and her friends in the autumn of 1914. They were on a preposterous scale. The ballroom in his enormous house on Lancaster Gate was redecorated each time with a new theme: images from the circus, the Wild West, Aubrey Beardsley's erotica or the Ballets Russes. Even the dinner tables were works of art, laden with purple orchids and the kind of rare wartime delicacies that only Moore's deep pockets could supply – avocados, terrapin and soft shell crab.

The drinking was more excessive still, with vodka and absinthe spiking the flow of champagne (whisky was still considered unacceptable for women, even behind Moore's 'barred doors'). There was dancing to ragtime and to the tropical twang of Hawaiian bands, and it continued until the breakfast eggs and

bacon appeared at dawn. Or rather it continued until Diana decided she was tired and wanted to go home, at which point Moore would abruptly command the band to stop and ask the rest of the guests to leave.

Everyone knew these parties were essentially for Diana's benefit, but very few realized how very complicated and compromised her relationship with Moore had now become. During these first months of the war the financier had grown even more powerful. Money flowed to him from mysterious ventures – he was reputed to be the owner of public utilities in four American states as well as in Canada and Brazil – and his wealth gave him entrée into the highest social circles. He was especially close to Sir John French, Commander in Chief of the British forces in France, with whom he shared his house, and it was for this reason that Violet, who had always loathed Moore, now actively encouraged his interest in Diana. She was desperate to keep John, her one remaining son, safe from the trenches, and her plan was to use Moore's influence with French to secure John a staff position at GHQ.

Diana felt herself to be in an intolerable position. Before the war she had been guiltily impressed by Moore's generosity, but she had hated it when George Gordon Ghasly, as she called him, had tried to kiss or caress her. Big and loud with his 'straight black hair, flattened face and atomic energy',⁴⁶ he could not have been more physically repulsive to her. Yet her mother, in a shocking aberration from her normal practice, was now telling Diana to suppress her antipathy and be 'nice'. As she recalled, 'To get my brother to GHQ was her obsessive hope. She thought that only I could coax the boon out of Moore.'⁴⁷ Not only was Diana expected to use up some of her precious free time attending the parties Moore threw for her, she had to tolerate being seated next to him at dinner, having endearments muttered thickly into her ear as the two of them 'shuffled and bunny hugged' across the dance floor, and accepting his good-night embrace.⁴⁸

John was due to be sent out to France in late February 1915,

yet the week before, when no word of a desk job had yet arrived, Diana apparently had to coax a little harder. She was at home, recovering from the measles, when Moore came into her bedroom at about three in the morning. The Duchess certainly knew he was there, and although there is no evidence to suggest that Diana allowed Moore to make love to her, this was far more intimacy than she had ever previously granted him. It was surely no coincidence that Sir John French had just written to Violet to assure her that a 'good plan' had been formed: and that despite John's own determined resistance he would eventually be removed from his position at the Front and transferred to the safety of GHQ.

Diana felt soiled by the whole business: in a letter to her friend Raymond Asquith she had described Moore's physical advances as 'sullyng . . . mutilating and scarring'.⁴⁹ Even more distasteful was the hypocrisy of her own mother who, normally so fastidious, had been willing to put her in so compromising a position. Yet if Diana recoiled inwardly, if her resentment against Violet acquired a new core of rage, she didn't alter her life. She continued her 'friendship' with Moore without any obvious break, and in some way she came to rationalize it as part of her war effort. However repellent Moore was to her, physically, his parties had become a highlight of London entertainment, especially for officers on leave. As Diana recalled, most of her generation now felt they were 'dancing a tarantella', infected by the need to keep moving to forget the horrors of war.⁵⁰ Moore's parties provided that hectic oblivion, night after night; and it was for a very good reason that they became nicknamed the Dances of Death.

If Diana's circle had become addicted to the distractions of dancing and drinking, she herself began flirting with other addictions too. When the strain of nursing and the exhaustion of partying became too much, she increasingly quieted her nerves with a dose of 'jolly old chlorers' (chloroform) from the local chemist or with an injection of morphine. Everyone was doing it. While hashish and the very new import, cocaine, had dubious

associations with crime and bohemia, morphine was deemed purely medicinal. Packets of paper impregnated with the drug were marketed as gifts for the boys in the trenches, whilst to those waiting at home it was a catch-all remedy for insomnia, anxiety and every variety of physical discomfort.

Diana craved the ecstatic stillness she got from morphine, the feeling that she had become ‘utterly self-sufficient . . . like a Chinaman, or God before he made the world . . . and was content with, or callous to the chaos’.⁵¹ She came to crave that detachment even more urgently when Raymond Asquith, one of the dearest of her friends, was due to be transferred from officer training camp to the Front in the spring of 1916.

Raymond was fourteen years older than Diana and had long been the undisputed leader of her male friends. ‘We all liked him the best,’ she admitted simply.⁵² He was handsome, poetic and clever, and although far out of her orbit when she was a teenager, he had been tender towards her earnest precocity and towards her star-struck parroting of his opinions. Even though he had got married in 1907 to Edward Horner’s sister, Katherine, the bond between them had grown. Diana felt most naturally herself in Raymond’s company, and it was almost inevitable that as she became older, their intimacy deepened into something like love.

Neither would do anything to hurt Katherine, and their relationship remained perfectly chaste, but in the destabilizing atmosphere of war, restraint was harder to maintain. Before Raymond’s departure to the Front became imminent, Diana raced down to visit him at his training camp in Folkestone, careless of what anyone might think. She might have loathed Moore’s groping, but she longed for Raymond’s touch. They met in a local inn, and what passed between them was clearly passionate, for afterwards he wrote, ‘Even into this foul and dingy inn the recollected glory of your beauty flings its unquenchable beam – and your darling darling charity of last night.’ Diana responded to her own ‘darling’ Raymond in equally impetuous terms: ‘I have loved so utterly your last two beseeching letters. I was

longing for you to claim me again, and now you have done it fully.’⁵³ They did not become lovers; whatever ‘charity’ Diana offered to Raymond, the affair was not consummated, and that fact allowed her to believe she was doing nothing to injure his wife. On the contrary, her love for Raymond made her feel closer to Katherine, and it was with the latter that she shared a desperate, pain-numbing needle of morphine on the night that Raymond was transferred to France.

Nor did Diana let her secret emotions interfere with the continuing drama of her public flirtations. She was constantly in the company of other men, and while this was a diversion and a camouflage for her true feelings, it was also part of wartime culture. Diana believed it was only honourable to take care of her officer friends when they were on leave, allowing men like Patrick Shaw Stewart to kiss her, accepting their declarations of love as though they had an actual future together.

Again, everyone was doing it. Between 1914 and 1918, across all the social classes, there was an increase in sexual activity outside marriage as soldiers on leave sought out physical consolation and many more women seemed willing to offer it. Some of these couplings led to hasty weddings, some to unwanted children. With birth control remaining clumsy and inadequate, thick rubber condoms for men, toxic douches for women, the proportion of illegitimate births during these years rose by 30 per cent in Britain alone.

Diana, however, retained some of her former caution. Even though she’d learned to scorn her mother’s hypocrisy in matters of sex she was scared to risk her virginity, even for the sake of a doomed officer. She fully expected to keep this carefully tended asset for the night of her marriage, and in moments of candour she admitted to herself that she was rarely tempted otherwise. Diana found sensual delight in many things, in dancing, drinking and in lovely clothes, but while the teasing dance of seduction was delicious to her, she recoiled from the more committed, messy prospect of sex. Even when she liked a man enough to allow him up to her bedroom in Arlington Street when the

Duchess was absent, she kept their love-making within very specific constraints.

Of these men it was Patrick Shaw Stewart who demanded most, begging Diana over and over again to let him into her bed, even if she would not marry him. But it was Duff Cooper to whom she permitted the most. Duff had the advantage of being constantly on hand – his government-protected work in the Foreign Office kept him in London, and out of the army. But in ways that Diana found hard to identify, he was also very attractive to her. He fell far short of Raymond's heroic beauty, his head was too large for his small feet and hands, and the downward cast of his eyes had an almost melancholic aspect. In the company of strangers he could also seem bookish and gruff. Yet, alone with close friends, and especially with women, Duff came alight with a witty, passionate ebullience and he had a power to charm that was disturbingly effective.

Duff adored women and, thanks to his close relationships with his mother and sister, he understood them well. He also prided himself on being a sexual connoisseur capable of running simultaneous affairs with a chorus girl, a titled lady, or the wife of a painter. However, he had long claimed that Diana was his ideal and, even before the war, had been writing her archly sentimental letters, in which he cast himself as her adoring troubadour: 'As for loving you best in the world, I think that might happen all too easily. I am really rather frightened that it will, for I feel that you would be terrible and have no pity.'⁵⁴

It was in a similarly extravagant vein that he wrote to her on 23 June 1914, concluding with the unknowingly but horribly ironic farewell, 'Goodbye, my darling – I hope that everyone whom you like better than me will die very soon.'⁵⁵

Death, of course, did come very soon, and Diana was increasingly reliant on Duff to console her as, one by one, the men with whom she had danced and flirted before the war were killed or injured at the Front. He was tenderly protective of her grief, writing to her in 1916, 'Your little face was so thin and sad tonight and I wished so to be alone with you and tell you how

I loved you.⁵⁶ He discovered too that his initial flamboyant devotion was deepening into a more adult kind of love. After a day spent visiting St Paul's and Westminster Abbey in March that year he wrote in his diary that she had opened his imagination to 'lots of things . . . I had never noticed before . . . The pleasure of doing that sort of thing with Diana is indescribable.'⁵⁷

And while Diana still yearned for Raymond, she began to fall in love with Duff. Even his bad habits had a charm for her. He gambled and drank too much, and incorrigibly lusted after other women, yet it gave her a pleasurable feeling of release to fight with him over his flaws. Sometimes Diana worried that she lacked passion, that her deepest emotions were blocked. Even in the most bitter wrangles with her mother, she rarely shouted or slammed a door. Rowing with Duff, however, she felt her emotions pour out in a satisfyingly clear current: during one argument in 1915 she actually hit him, and hit him so hard that his lip bled.

The ugliness of the scene aroused her, even more so the reconciliations that followed. With many people Diana was nervous of being forced into intimacy; dogged by her childhood fear of appearing shallow or dull she much preferred playing to a crowd. Alone with Duff, however, it was easy to talk and react, and with him too she felt a rare sexual confidence. He clearly desired her, but the fact that he never forced himself on her encouraged her to become more creatively responsive. One evening he came to her room as she was getting dressed for a *tableau vivant* – a popular entertainment during these years, in which decorative young women posed in costume to raise money for the war effort. Diana was wearing an ornate Russian headdress and ropes of pearls, and when Duff begged her to undo the bodice of her dress so that he could admire her, half-naked, in her finery, she gave him a performance worthy of Maud Allan.

Duff found Diana's combination of seduction and chastity to be very aphrodisiac: 'She . . . understands the game and how to play it . . . There is a great deal to be said for the love making

that sends one away hungry.' Blind to the irony of his own double standards, he noted that her dance of withholding and yielding kept his feelings at an exquisite pitch. The women who allowed him 'excessive intimacy' inevitably produced in him a reaction of 'contempt or disgust'.⁵⁸

Diana was grateful for Duff's tact, yet she was beginning to fret about her cautious and self-conscious virginal state. She judged herself to be lacking in poetry and generosity, especially when compared to the behaviour of some of her friends. Two in particular, Iris Tree and Nancy Cunard, were apparently using the war as an excuse to abandon all social restraint. Although a few years younger than her, they ran with the wildest crowds at the Café Royal and the Eiffel Tower restaurant in Soho. They rented a secret studio in the bohemian district of Fitzrovia, where they held riotous parties, and were often in the company of male strangers, with whom, it was said, they were recklessly intimate.

Diana was in some ways irritated by their behaviour, which she considered extreme and naive. When she visited their studio she was appalled by its squalor – the beds were unmade and the floor was littered with the detritus of parties: empty champagne bottles (broken at the neck to save the trouble of pulling a cork), overflowing ashtrays and, in the bathroom, traces of blood, semen and vomit. But she was reluctantly impressed by the number of lovers that Nancy and Iris appeared to take. 'They have more courage than me – and can seize an opportunity and hug and crush it against their palates irrespective of the taste and they are very happy while I go starved, and hesitating and checking my every impulse for fear of losing my pedestal of ice.'⁵⁹ She felt old and anomalous. Another more passionate woman would surely have yielded to Duff's seduction. Another woman would surely have made love to Raymond while she'd had the chance in Folkestone.

But such a chance would never come again, for on 15 September 1916, Raymond was shot on the battlefield of the Somme as he was leading his men out of their dugout. His was only one of hundreds of thousands of lives claimed by that summer's most

bloodily futile battle. All over Europe women were receiving letters and telegrams, informing them of the deaths of their husbands, sons or lovers. Yet Diana could think only of Raymond. The pain was excruciating: 'My brain is revolving so fast, screaming, "Raymond killed, my divine Raymond killed," over and over again.'⁶⁰ After the deaths of other friends, she had been able to weep for a few harrowing hours, then stoically return to her nursing and the nightly tarantella of denial. The loss of Raymond, however, was unendurable.

In the past Diana had suffered from occasional depression – days of dark listlessness she couldn't explain – but misery now settled into her like a toxin, a 'squalid low' emotion that prevented her from sleeping or concentrating on work.⁶¹ This time Duff couldn't help her. He had eventually persuaded her to explain why Raymond's loss had been so very terrible, and while he had been 'moved and amazed' by the revelation of Diana's secret love – he too had adored Raymond – his sympathy had inevitably been replaced by jealousy and resentment.

He grew emotionally distant, noting harshly that grief was making Diana look 'tired and worn' and he lost patience with her sexual reticence. Painfully he wondered what caresses she had permitted Raymond but denied him. When she clumsily attempted to reassure him that of course she loved him best 'among the living' he was furious. 'How', he taunted her, would he 'know that was true' since she refused him what he desired.

The two of them were actually spending more time alone together: dining in Duff's little flat in St James Street, walking through the streets of London, taking little jaunts to the countryside with picnics that Diana had carefully prepared. Yet often their quarrels made these occasions hateful, and by mid-November 1916, Diana suggested they would be better apart. 'Duff dear I cannot bear it at all you will no longer help me with my moods or be patient with my tired ways. You will not even let me lie quietly without raging at the little I sometimes needs must deny you.'⁶²

They were reconciled, yet still the quarrels continued. Duff

lost £170 at a single sitting of chemin de fer, and she told him despairingly that it was final, 'our relationship can never be the same again'.⁶³ When Patrick Shaw Stewart confided his continuing determination to marry Diana, Duff reacted with a shrug of equanimity, already wondering if he might be falling in love with another woman.

But in June 1917, he and Diana found themselves suddenly clinging to each other, as close as they had ever been. The massively depleted British army had finally introduced conscription, and was even extending the call-up to men in government-protected jobs. Duff was one of them, and when he heard the news he couldn't help a surge of wild elation. Sitting behind a desk while others fought and died, he had craved 'the experience and adventure everyone else has had'.⁶⁴ Yet excited as he was, he knew that the odds were terribly against him surviving, and the knowledge that he might never see Diana again refocused all his love and tenderness. As for Diana, the fear of losing Duff blotted out her lingering grief for Raymond. Schooled in the nightmare calculations of war, she began to count up, obsessively, the amount of time they had left together: 'I knew that for a little time he would be sent to a cadets' training college. I would see him less and less until he went to France. Then, with fair luck, once or twice on leave then Never never, never.' In real terror for her own mental state she wondered, 'Who will keep me sane,' when she had lost him, as she surely would.⁶⁵

Diana actually had a full nine months' grace before Duff was dispatched to the Front. On 28 April, after he had marched with all the other newly recruited Grenadiers from Chelsea Barracks to Waterloo station, she bravely wrote to him that she had 'adored his glorious spirits', describing the tears she wept as 'a great pride signifying only my complete love.'⁶⁶ Left behind in London, however, waiting for his first letters to arrive from France, she felt only 'listless and crippled'.

The war had become 'a blind murderous treadmill, with no sign of the beginning of the end.'⁶⁷ A generation had been laid waste for a cause that few could even make sense of (over two

hundred local men from the Rutland estate alone had been killed at the Front). The sound of bugles signifying a military funeral was commonplace, and shrines to the civilian dead were appearing everywhere as the big cities, especially London, were bombed by the enemy.

Early in the war, the bombs dropped by Zeppelin air ships had done terrifying but limited damage. It had been the done thing among Diana's set to 'lift a glass and laugh [them] to inaudibility'; people even felt a certain pride in having watched a raid. From a safe distance there was a mesmerizing spectacle in the raking searchlights seeking out the enemy's giant silver air machines, in the crack of an explosion followed by a sudden flare of fire. Now the raids were less frequent, but the new breed of German fighter planes, the Gothas and Giants, carried more lethal loads. In September 1917 Diana arrived at Arlington Street to find all the windows blown out, and 'a crater the size of half a tennis [sic] court ten yards away in the park'.⁶⁸ When caught in the middle of a raid in May 1918 she was no longer capable of 'laughing' away the threat. During a nightmarish three hours in which she was pressed among a crowd of cowering strangers 'the London Bridge gun shook our marrows and a procession of victims, dead and mangled, passed in the darkness'.⁶⁹

In this fourth year of the war Diana felt there was an ugliness to England now. The blackout-darkened streets had become home to all kinds of 'thieving and vicing'.⁷⁰ Conscientious objectors had always been targeted, but homosexuals, modern painters, poets and foreigners were now likely to be branded as potential traitors too. The legislation passed against aliens was more strictly enforced: Rudolph Stulik, Austrian proprietor of the Eiffel Tower, had already been interned, and Duff's friend, the German-born singer Olga Lynn, whose real name was Lowenthal, lived in daily fear of being deported.

It was in this darkening atmosphere that Noel Pemberton Billing published his claims that a group of dissolute aristocrats, painters, Jews, intellectuals and female followers of Allan's Cult of the Clitoris had been identified by the German Secret Service

as targets for blackmail, and as potential traitors or spies. It created a scandal – Maud Allan brought a libel action against Billing – and many in Diana’s circle feared being named on the MP’s list. Diana herself received a threatening letter from a man who claimed to have evidence about her ‘in relation to a case now much before the public’.⁷¹

There was an element of grim hilarity to the affair, as she described to Duff on 5 June. The Duchess remained convinced of Allan’s purity: ‘True to her school, she did not believe in the possibility of vice among women.’ More comically still, Diana reported, ‘Lord Albemarle is said to have walked into the Turf and said, “I’ve never heard of this Greek chap *Clitoris* they are all talking of.”’⁷²

But there were few people left with whom she could share the joke. By January 1918 Edward Horner and Patrick Shaw Stewart, two of her last surviving officer friends, had perished, and her correspondence with Duff was erratic. In the long gaps between letters, she was tormented by visions of him left dead or dying. Even when letters came, the censors’ deletions left her imagining unspoken horrors. Work was her only relief. Soon after Duff left for France Diana had volunteered for a second term at Guy’s, hoping that the unrelenting drudgery would tamp down her terrors. It was only for a month – her mother remained fiercely opposed to public hospital life – but as a temporary distraction it had worked. The exhaustion shut down her imagination and the suffering of her patients put her own agony in perspective. She had to treat some severely burned children during this period, using the then-accepted method of pouring hot melted wax over their raw wounds. The children’s pitiful screams haunted her, but it was then, Diana wrote, that she learned not to cry.

During this bleakest of periods, Diana lived tentatively from day to day. Yet she was now convinced that when the war ended she wanted to be with Duff. Previously they had only joked about marriage, each unsure of the other’s feelings, but now Diana

swore, 'If death will only spare him we will live our lives together.'⁷³ She swore, too, that she would no longer be intimidated by her mother's disapproval, even though she knew it would be formidable.

The Duchess had indeed observed the growing intimacy between Diana and Duff with alarm and had even begun to interrogate Diana's friends about the likelihood of an engagement, complaining to Katherine Asquith that she couldn't sleep at night for fear of her daughter 'marrying that awful Duff'.⁷⁴ As far as Violet was concerned, Duff was awful in too many ways to count. His father, the late Sir Alfred Cooper, had been an eminent surgeon and friend of King Edward VII, but his area of expertise – venereal disease – was something from which she could only shrink.* Duff's mother had been from a good family, but she had disgraced herself by leaving her first husband, living openly with her lover and, after the latter's death, earning her living as a trainee nurse. In fact, it was when Alfred Cooper spotted Lady Agnes scrubbing hospital floors that he had recognized her as the lovely young woman he had admired in his youth and asked her to marry him.

Had she read of this romantic coincidence in a book, the Duchess might have found it charming. It was not, however, something with which she wanted her family to be associated. She feared that Duff, with his reputation for drink and women, had inherited his mother's tainted genes, and it was hardly as if he had a compensating fortune. With an annual income of under £1,000 (his Foreign Office salary combined with his private allowance), Duff couldn't come close to offering Diana the life that Violet had planned.

She rallied her friends – Duff was 'a contemptible parvenu' opined Lady Sackville – but Diana, who before the war might have quailed at the idea of marrying so far outside her mother's

* Had Violet known of the nickname 'Cooper's clap trap' given to Sir Alfred's carriage, she would have been still more horrified.

expectations, had changed. And she believed that British society had changed too. As she wrote to Duff, 'In a sense the world shapes to hide our possible squalor.' With few servants and private cars available to anyone, it would be much harder for anyone to 'pity our poverty'.⁷⁵

She framed a virtuous picture of their future lives. While Duff volunteered his willingness to 'break my champagne glasses, throw away my cigars, tear up my cards . . . study the habits of buses and the intricacies of tubes',⁷⁶ she began to contemplate money-making schemes. Her first idea was to set up a nursing home with financial backing from Moore. It was a very respectable way of earning a living, she pointed out to Duff, 'without any notoriety or convention breaking for Their Graces to take exception to'. She even toyed briefly with a scheme to launch an aviation passenger business with the backing of her new friend, the newspaper magnate Max Beaverbrook. 'Scruples must fade,' she wrote firmly to Duff, 'we must be happy.'⁷⁷

It was hard to sustain that optimism while Duff was in danger, but against all the odds he continued to survive. In early October he was awarded a DSO for his courage in battle and given two weeks' leave in Paris. Diana gave him loving permission to take every advantage of reprieve from the Front: 'You know that I want your happiness above my own,' she wrote, although she also begged him to avoid gambling, catching a disease or making love to anyone she knew (her friend Diana Wyndham, to whom she knew Duff was attracted, also happened to be in Paris).⁷⁸

Less than a fortnight later she was 'intoxicated' to read in *The Times* that the war was almost over, and at the end of October Duff was, amazingly, back in London and in her arms. It was a rapturous reunion for both of them: 'All that I had hoped of happiness for the last 6 months came true,' wrote Duff in his diary.⁷⁹ Yet while he had returned home unscathed, too many of their friends had perished for them to feel guiltlessly happy. On 11 November, the formal declaration of Armistice, Diana spent the day dutifully with her family, but she couldn't bear to listen to the frenzied celebrations that roared through the London

streets, writing, 'After so much bitter loss it was unnatural to be jubilant.'⁸⁰

She was worried too about Duff, who was showing symptoms of the Spanish flu that had begun wreaking carnage across Europe. Having eaten an early supper with her mother at the Ritz, she slipped away to his flat. Their mood together was sombre: 'The dead were in our minds to the exclusion of the survivors.' Yet it wasn't only thoughts of their friends that darkened their spirits. 'The war was over,' Diana wrote. 'My own battle had now to be fought.'⁸¹ It was her and Duff now, ranged against the desires of her parents and the coercive forces of tradition and class.