FLAPPERS

Six Women of a Dangerous Generation

JUDITH MACKRELL

PAN BOOKS

CONTENTS

Author's Note and Acknowledgements

The 1920s was a decade of exhilarating change for women and this book tells the story of six in particular, each of whom profited from that decade in remarkable ways. Diana Cooper, Nancy Cunard, Tamara de Lempicka, Tallulah Bankhead, Zelda Fitzgerald and Josephine Baker were famous in their own right; for each of them the Twenties was a moment of exceptional opportunity. Yet viewed as a group these women were also very representative of their times: they chased similar ambitions, fought similar battles, even shared the quirks of their generation's collective personality.

The world they inhabited was also comparatively small. Despite living and working in a variety of cities, these women shared lovers and friendships as well as personal concerns. They were written about by the same novelists and journalists, photographed for the same publications. But biography is essentially about the colour and detail of individual lives and in writing this book I've been fortunate to profit from the groundwork of many other fine biographers. To their research and knowledge I owe a profound debt.

In the matter of language, the 1920s was a world away from our own politically conscious era. Young women were girls, blacks were often niggers, female actors were actresses and even though this usage can grate on modern ears, I've opted to retain

a flavour of it, for the sake of period accuracy. For the same reason I've presented quotations from letters and diaries, etc., in their original form, without tidying up oddities of spelling, grammar or idiom.

In the matter of money, which was of paramount concern to most of these women, I've tried to give a general sense of values and exchange rates, but not to track year-by-year changes. The franc in particular vacillated wildly against the other major currencies after the collapse of the Gold Standard in 1914, and its weakness against the dollar, coupled with bullish rises in the American stock market, was a major factor in Paris becoming so attractive to foreign artists and writers, and playing so central a role in this story.

The following offers the roughest of guides to the value of the money in the wage packets or bank accounts of these six women, using the Retail Price Index (RPI) to pin these values to the present day:

> In 1920, £1 was worth approximately $3.50, or 50 francs, which equates to £32.85 in today's values.
>
> In 1925, £1 was worth approximately $5.00, or 100 francs, and equates to £46.65 today.
>
> In 1930, £1 was worth approximately $3.50, or 95 francs, and equates to £51.75 today.

I would like to thank the following for their generous permission to quote from published and unpublished works: the Felicity Bryan Literacy Agency and John Julius Norwich for the Estates of Lady Diana Cooper and Duff Cooper for extracts from *A Durable Fire: the Letters of Duff and Diana Cooper*, edited by Artemis Cooper, compilation © Artemis Cooper 1983; *The Rainbow Comes and Goes*, *The Autobiography of Lady Diana Cooper* © The Estate of Lady Diana Cooper 1958; *The Duff Cooper Diaries 1915–1951*, edited and introducted by John Julius Norwich © 2005; Cooper Square Press for extracts from *Josephine Baker: The Hungry Heart*

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Aside from the biographers and historians who've gone before me, all of whom are listed in the bibliography, I want to thank those who've given exceptional, generous help and advice in the writing and publication of this book.

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And finally love, as always, to my family.

Judith Mackrell, January 2013

INTRODUCTION

On 2 October 1925 a young American dancer from the black ghetto of St Louis stood on the stage of the Théâtre des Champs-Elysées in Paris. Her limbs were trembling from exhaustion as well as from the clamour erupting from the crowd below. People in the audience were screaming, shouting, drumming their feet; yet what seemed to her a terrifyingly hostile noise was in fact the sound of Paris acknowledging a star. Just three months earlier Josephine Baker had been a skinny chorus girl living on a modest wage and a hopeful dream. Now, repackaged as a burnished, exotic beauty, she was about to be hailed as a cultural phenomenon.

The Paris correspondent of the *New Yorker* reported that within half an hour of Josephine's debut the city's bars and cafés were talking only of the magnificent eroticism of her dancing. Maurice Bataille, a restaurant owner who later became one of her lovers, claimed that Josephine's naked buttocks ('*Quel cul elle a!*') had simply given 'all Paris a hard-on'.[1] Yet over the following days she would be feted by artists and critics as a black pearl, an ebony Venus, a jazz age vamp with the soul of an African goddess.

Postcards of 'La Baker' went on sale, as did a range of Josephine dolls. Her shiny black hair and coffee-coloured skin, the source of so much abuse back home, were harnessed to the marketing of French beauty products: hair pomade for the glossing of Eton crops; walnut oil for the faking of summer tans.

Her hard, supple body was celebrated as an icon of contemporary style – reflecting the glossy streamlined aesthetic of art deco and the gamine flair of the French *garçonne*.

To some of the young women who watched her dance, Josephine held out the possibility of their own transformation. In many parts of the Western world, the 1920s had been greeted as a decade of change. The Great War might have detonated the optimism of the early century, shattering millions of lives, damaging economies and toppling regimes, yet out of its carnage the modern world seemed to be reinventing itself with astonishing speed. Fuelled by the rising American stock market and the ferocious gearing up of industry, the Twenties was emerging as a decade of mass consumption and international travel, of movies, radios, brightly coloured cocktails and jazz. It was a decade that held out the promise of freedom.

For women, that promise was especially tantalizing. The war had delivered voting rights and jobs to many and it had started to redraw the social map. When Josephine Baker came to Paris, she was transported to a culture and marketplace that would have been unimaginable to her before 1914, and the same was true for the Polish-Russian artist, Tamara de Lempicka.

In Tsarist Russia, where Tamara had grown up, she had been cocooned in a life of pleasure and privilege. But when the 1917 revolution had smashed that life apart she had been forced into exile with her husband and small child. Living in a small hotel room in Paris she'd had no skills with which to support herself other than a relatively untutored gift for painting and an undaunted sense of her own entitlement. By the late 1920s she had used both to recreate herself as one of the most fashionable artists of the new decade.

Tamara's most celebrated canvases were of her contemporaries, young women whose bodies radiated a lustre of sexual independence as redolent of 1920s style as Josephine's dancing. In fact, Tamara always claimed an affinity with Josephine, even though she never attempted to paint her: 'The woman made everyone who watched her weak with desire for her body. She

already looked like one of my paintings, so I could not ask her to pose.'[2]

Another admirer of Josephine's dancing was the poet and heiress Nancy Cunard. She, too, had left her home in England to settle in Paris, but while she frequented the same circuit of nightclubs, bars and parties as Tamara, her closest ties were with the Parisian avant-garde. That autumn she was disentangling herself from an affair with the Dadaist Tristan Tzara and falling in love with Louis Aragon, one of the founders of surrealism.

Nancy had grown up a lonely, bookish little girl but her antagonism towards her socially voracious mother had hardened her determination to make a new life for herself in Paris. Eight years later, her transformation from English heiress to Left Bank radical would appear complete. Her hair was sharply cropped, her eyes outlined with kohl, her arms loaded to the elbow with ivory and ebony bangles, and among her long list of lovers would be a black jazz pianist from Georgia.

Also in Paris during the mid-1920s was Zelda Fitzgerald. Originally a small-town Southern belle from Alabama, her 'slender supple' grace and 'spoiled alluring mouth' had famously become the template from which her husband, the novelist Scott Fitzgerald, created his exquisitely modern heroines.[3] Her former childhood friend Tallulah Bankhead had much admired Zelda, feeling herself to be the plump and truculent ugly duckling of her own Southern family, but at the age of fifteen Tallulah had starved herself into beauty and won a minor film role in a magazine competition. From there she progressed to a career on Broadway and in London's West End where, by 1925, she had become a star. Brash, witty and luxuriantly pretty, Tallulah was a novelty on the London stage.

No less exotic to American audiences was the very English, very aristocratic Lady Diana Cooper, who during the mid-1920s was touring the States in Max Reinhardt's theatrical spectacle *The Miracle*. As the youngest daughter of the 8th Duke of Rutland, Diana was only one rung below royalty and as such had grown up in a gilded cage, from which she was expected to

emerge on the arm of a rich and titled husband. When she fell in love with a man who possessed neither money nor rank, she broke with centuries of tradition. She had committed herself to earning the money that would launch her husband in politics and had done so by embarking on a career that a generation earlier would have risked social disgrace.

By the autumn of 1925 all six of these women were travelling to places far beyond those that they, or anyone else, could have envisioned. They didn't do so as a recognizable group, although their lives intersected in many ways. But the journeys they took were emblematic of larger changes that were taking place around them, and which were throwing the lives and expectations of women into profoundly different configurations.

To the public eye, these changes were sufficiently vivid to inspire the branding of a new breed of women – the much demonized and much mythologized 'flapper'. Like Ardita Farnam,[4] one of Scott Fitzgerald's early heroines, the flapper seemed to be motivated by a single aim: 'to live as I liked always and to die in my own way'. Riding the transforming dynamic of the 1920s she was seen to demand everything that had been denied her mother, from choosing her own sexual relationships and earning her own living, to cutting her hair, shortening her skirts and smoking cigarettes in public.

For Diana, the oldest of the women in this book, the determination to 'live as I liked' was rooted in the harrowing dislocations of the war years. As traditional rules of class were suspended she found the nerve to defy her family, first to volunteer as a nurse, then to claim the marriage and career of her choice. Nancy, too, used the war to carve out her own rebellion, but she would push far beyond Diana in embracing the most radical elements of the Twenties' experiment in art, fashion and lifestyle. Tamara, Tallulah and Zelda also journeyed remarkable distances during the decade, but they not only embodied the flapper through the spirit of their personal lives they gave her a very public stamp – Tamara in the women she painted, Tallulah in the characters that she portrayed on stage and Zelda in the fictional heroines

created by Scott, and eventually by herself. As for Josephine, who became internationally famous as the physical incarnation of jazz, and the free syncopated energy of the Twenties, she made the most remarkable journey of all as she transcended the poverty of her childhood to become an icon of black music, and modernist art.

Of course, the six women in this book experienced the 1920s in exceptional ways. But what made them emblematic of their time was the spirit of audacity with which they reinvented themselves. The young women of this era weren't the first generation in history to seek a life beyond marriage and motherhood; they were, however, the first significant group to claim it as a right. And from the way the flapper was written about and represented it was clear that, to many, she represented a profound social threat.

During the late nineteenth century the term flapper had still carried a suggestion of innocence, evoking the image of gawky, unfledged teenage girls, but even by the end of the war the term was acquiring connotations of brashness and defiance. In October 1919, *The Times* published a column about the new flapper, warning of the restive mood that was brewing among Britain's young female population. Two million of them had taken paid work during the war and a substantial number were determined to remain in employment, despite pressures to relinquish their jobs to returning soldiers. The following year, the same paper went on to question the wisdom of extending voting rights to women under thirty, dismissing them as a single feckless type, the 'frivolous scantily-clad, jazzing flapper . . . to whom a dance, a new hat or a man with a car is of more importance than the fate of nations.'[5] Given the terrible decimation of Britain's young men during the war, newspapers also bristled with warnings of the destabilizing effect these flappers might have on the country, as an unprecedented generation of unmarried and independent women appeared to be hell-bent on having their own way.

In France, women would have to wait until 1944 to get the

vote; however that didn't inhibit the power of this post-war generation to dismay and disturb. Victor Margueritte's 1922 novel *La Garçonne* created a national scandal (and sold half a million copies) by recounting the adventures of his heroine, Monique, after she has ditched her worthless fiancé to embrace a life of lesbianism, drugs and single motherhood.

At the beginning of the decade the fascinating, defiant flapper was a type more read about in novels and newspapers than encountered on the street, but within a few years, she'd become the image to which hundreds of thousands of ordinary young women aspired. Fitzgerald satirized these would-be flappers in his description of Catherine, a minor character in his novel *The Great Gatsby*: '. . . a slender worldly girl of about thirty, with a solid, sticky bob of red hair, and a complexion powdered milky white. Her eyebrows had been plucked and then drawn on again at a more rakish angle . . . When she moved about there was an incessant clinking as innumerable pottery bracelets jingled up and down upon her arms.'[6]

Catherine exists in the novel only as a construction of flapper accessories and style; and to Fitzgerald in 1925 she symbolized the degree to which the transforming dream of the 1920s was fuelled as much by economics, the appetite for consumption, as it was by the lure of freedom. Within the competitive climate of post-war capitalism the new fun-seeking flapper with her dyed hair, bee-stung lips and Charleston frocks was proving to be a wonderful opportunity for business.

After a short post-war decline, the number of working women had risen sharply across the Western world (up to 500 per cent in parts of America), and those who were young and financially independent were opening up a lucrative market for the beauty and fashion industries. They were targeted with new brands of cosmetics and depilatories; with skin treatments that promised the rejuvenating magic of crushed almonds, pine bark, rose oil and hydrogen peroxide. Celebrities like Josephine were paid large sums to endorse them, for the profits to be made were immense. In 1915 American advertisers invested just $1.5 million

in the beauty industry; by 1930 that sum had multiplied by ten. In 1907 the French chemist Eugène Schueller patented a new hair dye, which by 1930 had launched him and his company, L'Oréal, into one of France's most lucrative enterprises.

Never before had so many ordinary women been told that it was their right to look lovely. Dieting fads and slimming pills flooded the market, all promising to produce the narrow-hipped, flat-chested flapper silhouette. Before the war few respectable women smoked, but numbers rocketed when cigarettes were rebranded as a route to slenderness. In 1927 Lucky Strike launched an ad campaign that featured the actress Constance Talmadge with a cigarette in her hand. The accompanying slogan, 'Reach for a Lucky instead of a sweet', generated a 300 per cent rise in sales.

The fashion industry entered a similar boom. With designers like Coco Chanel and Jean Patou pioneering narrow shift dresses and short skirts, it was possible for modern technologies to imitate their designs with unparalleled cheapness and speed. (In 1913 an average of twenty square yards of fabric went into the making of a dress; by 1928 that had been scaled down to seven.) Garments created in a French atelier could be run up in factories and sold through shops, department stores and mail order catalogues on both sides of the Atlantic.* Madelaine Vionnet was the first of the European couturiers to make ready-to-wear designs that could be shipped direct to America. For those uncertain how to wear the new styles, a barrage of tips were available in women's magazines and newspaper columns. It was, in theory, a liberating democracy, yet the pressure to be fashionable brought its own miseries. As early as 1920 Fitzgerald wrote about the plight of a socially maladroit girl who is persuaded to cut off her one beautiful asset, her long hair.† In real life, a fourteen-year-old from Chicago tried to gas herself because

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* Sears in America, Freemans in Britain and La Redoute in France all did big business.

† The short story 'Bernice Bobs Her Hair'.

'other girls in her class rolled their stockings, had their hair bobbed and called themselves flappers', and she alone was refused permission by her parents.[7]

To some contemporary commentators this addiction to style was the mark of a superficial and self-absorbed generation. Samuel Hopkins Adams, in the foreword to his 1923 bestseller *Flaming Youth*,* anatomized the flapper as 'restless and seductive, greedy, discontented, unrestrained, a little morbid, more than a little selfish'. As she casually spent her money on a new powder compact or string of beads she also seemed shockingly a-political. She seemed oblivious of the battles that had so recently been fought on her behalf: the right to control her own wealth, to vote and to enter professions like the law. Even to wear the clothes of her choice. For decades, adherents of the British Rational Dress Society† – or the Aesthetic Dress Reform movement in Europe – had been ridiculed as cranks. Yet as they correctly claimed, the freedom to wear comfortable clothes was almost as crucial a right as universal suffrage. No woman could claim effective equality with a man while her organs were being slowly crushed by whalebone corsets, and her movements impeded by bustles and petticoats that added over a stone to her body weight.

But if the flapper seemed to her critics to be passive in her politics and selfish in her desires, to others she was celebrated as a new and necessary phase in feminism. The vote had been a public milestone on the journey towards emancipation, but just as important was the unfettering of women's private emotions. The American writer Dorothy Dunbar Bromley applauded this generation's ability to disengage from the traditional feminine virtues of sacrifice and duty. To her, their embrace of an 'inescapable inner compulsion to be individuals in their own right'[8] represented nothing less than a seismic shift in female consciousness.

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* Published under his pseudonym Warner Fabian.

† Founded in 1881, one of its modest demands was that a woman's underwear, without shoes, should weigh no more than seven pounds.

For birth-control campaigners like Marie Stopes and Margaret Sanger, the key battle was for sexual freedom. Change was slow: pre-marital sex was still far from the norm for women in the 1920s, but while only 14 per cent of American women admitted to it in 1900, by 1925 the number had risen to 39 per cent. Contraception for women was drastically enhanced with the invention of the Dutch Cap; divorce was very gradually gaining social acceptance, and much else that had been shadowy in the sexual lives of women was more openly acknowledged. The fashionable chic attached to lesbianism in the 1920s might not have been a true reflection of public opinion, but it saw many more women daring to identify and acknowledge their sexual tastes. One of the most brazen was Mercedes de Acosta, whose tally of lovers was said to include Isadora Duncan, Greta Garbo, Marlene Dietrich and Tallulah Bankhead. 'Say what you will about Mercedes,' commented her friend Alice B. Toklas, 'she's had the most important women of the twentieth century.'[9]

To Dorothy Dunbar Bromley, it was the flapper's willingness to assert her own desires that made her key not only to feminism but to the larger spirit of the age. Traditional notions of reverence, obligation and prudence had been devalued by the war. As Aldous Huxley wrote to his father in late 1923, it was as though his generation had experienced a 'violent disruption of almost all the standards, conventions and values current in the previous epoch'.[10] From one perspective that moral disruption left its survivors precariously untethered to any solid sense of principle or place. Gertrude Stein famously described them as 'the lost generation'. Yet from another perspective this ideological weightlessness felt like liberty. It gave the young permission to turn their back on the past and focus on their own brightly lit present.

The present moment was pretty much all that Zelda Fitzgerald cared about in 1920 as she rode down 5th Avenue on the bonnet of a taxi. That and her determination to be unlike all 'the little women' back home in Montgomery.

Seventeen-year-old Tallulah felt much the same as she swaggered around New York, quipping, 'I'm a lesbian, what do you

do?' So, too, did Nancy as she drank jugs of cheap white wine and courted scandal on the arm of her black lover, or Josephine as she saw her image blazoned across Paris.

All these women lived many of their private moments on the public stage. Having made their names as writers, painters or performers, as well as popular celebrities, the things they said and did, the clothes they wore, were routinely reported in the press and had a widespread impact on other women. Yet stylish, talented and extraordinary as these six were, to imagine their lives now one has to look past the glamour and glare of their fame. Often they feel closest to us when they were struggling and uncertain. None of them had role models to follow as they grappled with the implications of their independence. Their mothers and grandmothers could not advise them how to combine sexual freedom with love, or how to combine their public image with personal happiness. Tallulah and Josephine, who wanted enduring love, were duped time and again by grifters and sensation seekers, interested only in their money and their éclat. Nancy, trying to live as fearlessly and frankly as a man, was dogged with the reputation of a nymphomaniac. And while all six women attempted marriage, only Diana became adept at the compromises involved. Children were even more complicated. Tamara de Lempicka could never shake off accusations from her family that, in her determination to experience everything for the sake of her art, she had become an unnatural, even destructive mother.

By the end of the 1920s and the beginning of the 1930s all six women were reaching critical points of transition in their lives. This book, too, ends on the cusp of the old and new decade. It was the point at which the experimental party spirit of the Twenties was coming into collision with economic crisis, with the extreme politics of communism and fascism and the gathering clouds of war. And just as this moment heralded the winding down of the jazz age, so too it marked the end of the flapper era. While some of that generation were settling into more traditional lives, others were simply too tired or too damaged to sustain their former momentum.

Short-lived as it seemed, however, the Twenties had created a historic shift for women. So many had tried to flex their freedom in unprecedented ways, so many had stood up against those who judged them. Some of their behaviour was self-promoting and silly – Tallulah turning cartwheels along a London pavement; Zelda throwing herself fully dressed into a fountain; some of it was destructive – Nancy breaking hearts and making herself ill as she experimented with lovers across London and Paris – but it was never less than valiant. In their various attempts to live and die in their own way, the flappers represented a genuinely subversive force. Willing to run the risks of their independence as well as enjoy its pleasures, there were good reasons for them to be perceived as women of a dangerous generation.

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 whomever 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

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* 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 silverpoint 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 passageways, 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

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* 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. Obligingly, 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 schoolroom 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 breastplate, 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

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* 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

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* 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, ragtime 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 unmarriageable. 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-

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* 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.

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