

from
FLAPPER JANE
1925

----- *Bruce Bliven* -----

The passage of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920 granted women the right to vote—and fostered new attitudes among many young women. Nowhere was this more evident than in the short skirts, unbuckled boots, loose beads, and heavy makeup of the “flapper.” Daring-minded teenage girls shocked older generations with their outrageous fashions and attitudes, although the author of this magazine article sounds mostly amused.

THINK THROUGH HISTORY: Analyzing Causes, Recognizing Effects

Why do you think the push for the vote ushered in an era of new attitudes and fashion among many American women?

Jane’s a flapper. That is a quaint, old-fashioned term, but I hope you remember its meaning. As you can tell by her appellation, Jane is 19....She urgently denies that she is a member of the younger generation. The younger generation, she will tell you, is aged 15 to 17; and she professes to be decidedly shocked at the things they do and say....Yet if the younger generation shocks her as she says, query: how wild is Jane?

Before we come to this exciting question, let us take a look at the young person as she strolls across the lawn of her parents’ suburban home, having just put the car away after driving sixty miles in two hours. She is, for one thing, a very pretty girl. Beauty is the fashion in 1912. She is frankly, heavily made up, not to imitate nature, but for an altogether artificial effect—pallor mortis, poisonously scarlet lips, richly ringed eyes—the latter looking not so much debauched (which is the intention) as diabetic....And there are, finally, her clothes.

These were estimated the other day by some statistician to weigh two pounds.... I doubt they come within half a pound of such bulk. Jane isn’t wearing much, this summer. If you’d like to know exactly, it is: one dress, one step-in, two stockings, two shoes.

A step-in, if you are 99 and 44/100ths percent ignorant, is underwear—one piece, light, exceedingly brief but roomy. Her dress, as you can’t possibly help knowing if you have even one good eye, and get around at all outside the Old People’s Home, is also brief. It is cut low where it might be high, and vice versa. The skirt comes just an inch below her knees, overlapping by a faint fraction her rolled and twisted stockings. The idea is that when she walks in a bit of a breeze, you shall now and then observe the knee (which is *not* rouged—that’s just newspaper talk) but always in an accidental, Venus-surprised-at-the-bath

sort of way. This is a bit of coyness which hardly fits in with Jane's general character.

Jane's haircut is also abbreviated. She wears of course the very newest thing in bobs, even closer than last year's shingle. It leaves her just about no hair at all in the back, and 20 percent more than that in the front....Because of this new style, one can confirm a rumor heard last year; Jane has ears.

The corset is as dead as the dodo's grandfather; no feeble publicity pipings by the manufacturers, or calling it a "clasp around" will enable it, as Jane says, to "do a Lazarus." The petticoat is even more defunct. Not even a snicker can be raised by telling Jane that once the nation was shattered to its foundations by the shadow-skirt. The brassiere has been abandoned, since 1924....

These which I have described are Jane's clothes, but they are not merely a flapper uniform. They are *The Style, Summer of 1925, Eastern Seaboard*. These things and none other are being worn by all of Jane's sisters and her cousins and her aunts. They are being worn by ladies who are three times Jane's age, and look ten years older; by those twice her age who look a hundred years older. Their use is so universal that in our larger cities the baggage transfer companies one and all declare they are being forced into bankruptcy. Ladies who used to go away for the summer with six trunks can now pack twenty dainty costumes in a bag.

Not since 1820 has feminine apparel been so frankly abbreviated as at present; and never, on this side of the Atlantic, until you go back to the little summer frocks of Pocahontas. This year's styles have gone quite a long step toward genuine nudity. Nor is this merely the sensible half of the population dressing as everyone ought to, in hot weather. Last winter's styles weren't so dissimilar, except that they were covered up by fur coats and you got the full effect only indoors. And improper costumes never have their full force unless worn on the street. Next year's styles, from all one hears, will be, as they already are on the continent, even *More So*....

"Jane," say I, "I am a reporter representing American inquisitiveness. Why do all of you dress the way you do?"

"I don't know," says Jane. This reply means nothing: it is just the device by which the younger generation gains time to think. Almost at once she adds:

"The old girls are doing it because youth is. Everybody wants to be young, now—though they want all us young people to be something else. Funny, isn't it?"

"In a way," says Jane, "it's just honesty. Women have come down off the pedestal lately. They are tired of this mysterious feminine-charm stuff. Maybe it goes with independence, earning your own living and voting and all that. There was always a bit of the harem in that cover-up-your-arms-and-legs business, don't you think?"

"Women still want to be loved," goes on Jane, warming to her theme, "but they want it on a 50-50 basis, which includes being admired for the qualities they really possess. Dragging in this strange-allurement stuff doesn't seem sporting. It's like cheating in games, or lying."

“Ask me, did the War start all this?” says Jane helpfully. “The answer is, how do I know? How does anybody know?”

“I read this book whaddaya-call-it by Rose Macaulay, and she showed where they’d been excited about wild youth for three generations anyhow—since 1870. I have a hunch maybe they’ve always been excited.

“Somebody wrote in a magazine how the War had upset the balance of the sexes in Europe and the girls over there were wearing the new styles as part of the competition for husbands. Sounds like the bunk to me. If you wanted to nail a man for life I think you’d do better to go in for the old-fashioned line: ‘March me to the altar, esteemed sir, before you learn whether I have limbs or not.’

“Of course, not so many girls are looking for a life meal-ticket nowadays. Lots of them prefer to earn their own living and omit the home-and-baby act. Well, anyhow, postpone it years and years. They think a bachelor girl can and should do everything a bachelor man does.

“It’s funny,” says Jane, “that just when women’s clothes are getting scanty, men’s should be going the other way. Look at the Oxford trousers!—as though a man had been caught by the ankles in a flannel quicksand.”

Do the morals go with the clothes? Or the clothes with the morals? Or are they independent? These are questions I have not ventured to put to Jane, knowing that her answer would be “so’s your old man.” Generally speaking, however, it is safe to say that as regards the wildness of youth there is a good deal more smoke than fire. Anyhow, the new Era of Undressing, as already suggested, has spread far beyond the boundaries of Jane’s group. The fashion is followed by hordes of unquestionably monogamous matrons, including many who join heartily in the general ululations as to what young people are coming to. Attempts to link the new freedom with prohibition, with the automobile, the decline of Fundamentalism, are certainly without foundation. These may be accessory, and indeed almost certainly are, but only after the fact.

That fact is, as Jane says, that women to-day are shaking off the shreds and patches of their age-old servitude. “Feminism” has won a victory so nearly complete that we have even forgotten the fierce challenge which once inhered in the very word. Women have highly resolved that they are just as good as men, and intend to be treated so. They don’t mean to have any more unwanted children. They don’t intend to be debarred from any profession or occupation which they choose to enter. They clearly mean (even though not all of them yet realize it) that in the great game of sexual selection they shall no longer be forced to play the role, simulated or real, of helpless quarry. If they want to wear their heads shaven, as a symbol of defiance against the former fate which for three millennia forced them to dress their heavy locks according to male decrees, they will have their way. If they should elect to go naked nothing is more certain than that naked they will go, while from the sidelines to which he has been relegated mere man is vouchsafed permission only to pipe a feeble Hurrah!

Hurrah!

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THINK THROUGH HISTORY : ANSWER

Students may answer that the struggle to gain the vote for women ushered in a new era in attitudes and fashion because it challenged ideas about acceptable social, political, and economic roles for women. Students may cite the comments of “Jane” about how young single women who expect to be able to earn their own living also expect to be able to behave like young single men. Students may also cite her assertion that women have “come down off the pedestal lately” and are less inhibited about their behavior and their clothing.