

Primary Source - The Flapper (1915)

Source: (From "The Flapper," by H. L. Mencken, in *The Smart Set* 45, no. 2, (February 1915): 1-2.

The American language, curiously enough, has no name for her. In German she is *der Backfisch*, in French she is *l'ingénue*, in English she is the Flapper. But in American, as I say, she is nameless, for Chicken will never, never do. Her mother, at her age, was a Young Miss; her grandmother was a Young Female. But she herself is no Young Miss, no Young Female. Oh, dear, no! ...

Observe, then, this nameless one, this American Flapper. Her skirts have just reached her very trim and pretty ankles; her hair, newly coiled upon her skull, has just exposed the ravishing whiteness of her neck. A charming creature! Graceful, vivacious, healthy, appetizing. It is a delight to see her bite into a chocolate with her pearly teeth. There is music in her laugh. There is poetry in her drive at tennis. She is an enchantment through the plate glass of a limousine. Youth is hers, and hope, and romance, and-

Well, well, let us be exact: let us not say innocence. This flapper, to tell the truth, is far, far, far from a simpleton. An Ingénue to the Gaul, she is actually as devoid of ingenuousness as a newspaper reporter, a bartender or a midwife. The age she lives in is one of knowledge. She herself is educated. She is privy to dark secrets. The world bears to her no aspect of mystery. She has been taught how to take care of herself.

For example, she has a clear and detailed understanding of all the tricks of white slave traders, and knows how to circumvent them. She is on the lookout for them in matinee lobbies and railroad stations-benevolent-looking old women who pretend to be ill, plausible young men who begin business with "Beg pardon," bogus country girls who cry because their mythical brothers have failed to meet them. She has a keen eye for hypodermic needles, chloroform masks, closed carriages. She has seen all these sinister machines of the devil in operation on the screen.... She has followed the war upon them in the newspapers. Life, indeed, is almost empty of surprises, mysteries, horrors to this Flapper of 1915. She knows the exact percentage of lunatics among the children of drunkards.... She knows exactly what the Wassermann reaction [a blood test for venereal disease] is, and has made up her mind that she will never marry a man who can't show an unmistakable negative.... She is opposed to the double standard of morality, and favors a law prohibiting it.

This Flapper has forgotten how to simper; she seldom blushes; it is impossible to shock her. She saw "Damaged Goods" without batting an eye, and went away wondering what the row over it was all about. The police of her city having prohibited "Mrs. Warren's Profession," [a novel about prostitution] she read it one rainy Sunday afternoon, and found it a mass of platitudes.... She slaved at French in her finishing school in order to read Anatole France. She plans to read Havelock Ellis during the coming summer.

As I have said, a charming young creature. There is something trim and trig and confident about her. She is easy in her manners. She bears herself with dignity in all societies. She is graceful, rosy, healthy, appetizing. It is a delight to see her sink her pearly teeth into a chocolate, a macaroon, even a potato. There is music in her laugh. She is youth, she is hope, she is romance—she is wisdom!