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Stepping Out in the Twenties

ONE advantage in growing older is the discovery that a time machine is really superfluous. Memory is long, and much of the pleasure of living is to be found in the fact that man is intellectually a ruminant. The future may exercise a scientific imagination, but for most of us it is as cold as space: only the past can come alive in the mind. And now and then a whole generation seems to feel a wave of nostalgia. At the moment—as readers are reminded on page 6—the wave has reached us from the nineteen-twenties.

It was mainly in the United States and England that the twenties were "roaring," and although a noise in those parts must sooner or later reach New Zealand, it was softened by distance. Prohibition in America, and the bootlegging and gang wars which came out of it, were news items in the papers. The eccentric behaviour of young people in London was also outside our experience: we were all too busy, and not rich enough, to indulge in any pale version of West End sophistication. But the cinema was spreading rumour and example; the new clothes were here, and the dances; and above the sentimental songs of Missouri and Ohio could be heard the wail of the saxophone. Strangest of all, perhaps, was the way that women, obeying a distant summons—like birds in flight, swerving as if on a single wing—put off whalebone and heavy draperies, and stepped out to an unaccustomed freedom. Dresses were simpler, and bodies were visibly inside them. The hem moved higher, until—to the fascinated interest of men waiting at tram stops—it reached the knees. Sometimes the results were disconcerting: for the female leg,

although beautiful in the ideal, must now and then fall a little below perfection. The close-fitting hats may now seem quaint; but they rested neatly on bobbed heads, and women still understood (as fewer of them understand today) that hats and accessories are important. In spite of domestic argument and crisis, wives and daughters began to appear in public with "busters," "shingles" and "Eton crops"; and mothers, even grandmothers, were soon to follow them.

As usual, men were conservative. A few of them, the bolder ones, could be seen abroad in straw "boaters" and striped blazers; but for the most part they were satisfied with minor changes in the cut of their suits. Many of them, however, were learning to drive motor-cars, thereby contributing more than they realised to the march of fashion. In four years of war there had been danger and loss, and a feeling everywhere that solid foundations were collapsing. Now that it was over, and even though peace was to be everlasting, nothing could be quite as before. Women had left their homes to work in offices and factories. They liked the taste of freedom; and when a woman thinks of freedom, or feels that change is in the air, she thinks at once of how she looks and what she is wearing. There have been many changes since then; and much that was foolish and extravagant in the twenties could not survive the chill winds of the thirties. But for a few years the world seemed to be different, and if part of our present attitude is merely nostalgia, and not to be trusted, a feeling persists that it was a robust and hopeful time in which to be young.

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