

Charity Girls and City Pleasures

In New York City, between 1880 and 1920, young, unmarried, working-class women experimented with new forms of sexuality and new types of relationships with men very much at odds with our stereotypes of Victorian sexuality and also with middle-class notions of respectability. Most of these women were single wage earners who toiled in the city's factories, shops, and department stores, while devoting their evenings to the lively entertainment of the streets, public dance halls, and other popular amusements. Born or educated in the United States, many adopted a cultural style meant to distance themselves from their immigrant roots and familial traditions. Such women dressed in the latest finery, negotiated city life with ease, and sought intrigue and adventure with male companions. For this group of working women, sexuality became a central dimension of their emergent culture (1).

These New York working women frequented amusements in which familiarity and intermingling among strangers, not decorum, defined normal public behavior between the sexes. At one respectable Turnverein ball, for example, a vice investigator described closely the chaotic activity in the barroom between dances:

Most of the younger couples were hugging and kissing; there was a general mingling of men and women at the different tables . . . they were all singing and carrying on, they kept running around the room and acted like a mob of lunatics let lo[ose] (2).

Underlying this relaxed sexual style and heterosocial interaction of working-class youth was the custom of "treating." Men often treated their female companions to drinks and refreshments, theater tickets, and other incidentals. Women might pay a dance hall's entrance fee or carfare out to an amusement park, but they relied on men's treats to see them through the evening's

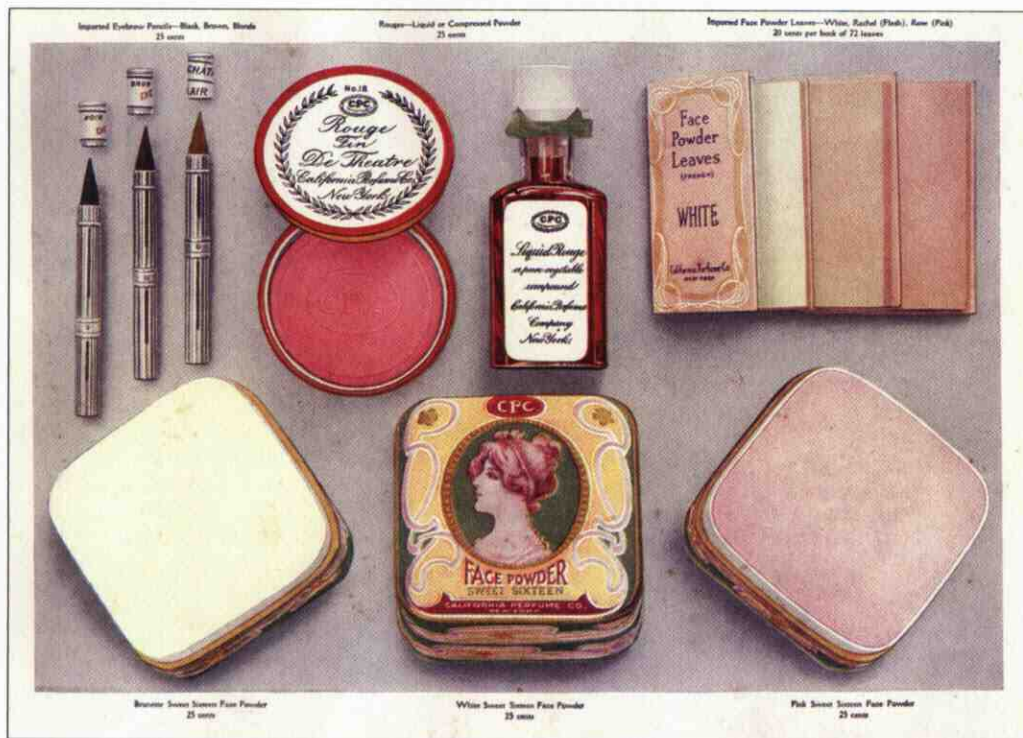
entertainment. Such treats were highly prized by young working women. As Belle Israels, a middle-class social reformer investigating the behaviors of such young women, remarked, the announcement that "he treated" was "the acme of achievement in retailing experiences with the other sex" (3).

Treating was not a one-way proposition, however, but entailed an exchange relationship. Financially unable to reciprocate in kind, women offered sexual favors of varying degrees, ranging from flirtatious companionship to sexual intercourse, in exchange for men's treats. "Pleasures don't cost girls so much as they do young men," asserted one saleswoman. "If they are agreeable they are invited out a good deal, and they are not allowed to pay anything." Reformer Lillian Betts concurred, observing that the working woman held herself responsible for failing to wangle men's invitations and believed that "it is not only her misfortune, but her fault; she should be more attractive" (4). Gaining men's treats placed a high premium on allure and personality, and sometimes involved aggressive and frank "overtures to men whom they desire to attract," often with implicit sexual proposals. One investigator, commenting on women's dependency on men in their leisure time, aptly observed that "those who are unattractive, and those who have puritanic notions, fare but ill in the matter of enjoyments. On the other hand those who do become popular have to compromise with the best conventional usage" (5).

At the time, reformers, social workers, and journalists viewed working-class women's sexuality through middle-class lenses, invoking sexual standards that set "respectability" against "promiscuity." Yet in their workplaces and leisure activities, many working women discovered a milieu that tolerated, and at times encouraged, physical and verbal familiarity between men and women, and stressed the exchange of sexual favors for social and



Coney Island beach and boardwalk scene. Working men and women enjoyed going to beaches and amusement parks where the men were expected to "treat" the women. (Strobridge Lith. Co., ca. 1898. Image courtesy of the Library of Congress, Theatrical Poster Collection.)



The California Perfume Company's catalog described its newest products to its sales staff. (California Perfume Company's "Color Plate Catalog," 1920. Image courtesy of the Duke University Rare Book and Manuscript Library.)

economic advantages. Such women probably received conflicting messages about the virtues of virginity and necessarily mediated the parental, religious, and educational injunctions concerning chastity, and the "lessons" of urban life and labor. The choice made by some women to engage in a relaxed sexual style needs to be understood in terms of the larger relations of class and gender that structured their sexual culture.

Most single working-class women were wage-earners for a few years before marriage, contributing to the household income or supporting themselves. Sexual segmentation of the labor market placed women in semiskilled, seasonal employment with high rates of turnover. Few women earned a "living wage," estimated to be \$9.00 or \$10.00 a week in 1910, and the wage differential between men and women was vast. Those who lived alone in furnished rooms or boarding houses consumed their earnings in rent, meals, and clothing. Many self-supporting women were forced to sacrifice an essential item in their weekly budgets, particularly food, in order to pay for amusements. Under such circumstances, treating became a viable option. "If my boy friend didn't take me out," asked one working woman, "how could I ever go out?" (6). While many women accepted treats from steadies, others had no qualms about receiving them from acquaintances or men they picked up at amusement places. Financial resources were little better for the vast majority of women living with families and relatives. Most of them contributed all of their earnings to the family, receiving only small amounts of spending money, usually \$.25 to \$.50 a week, in return. This sum covered the costs of simple entertainments, but could not purchase higher priced amusements (7).

The tenement home, too, presented a problem to parents who wished to maintain control over their daughters' sexuality. Typical tenement apartments offered limited opportunities for family activities or chaperoned socializing. Courtship proved difficult in homes where families and boarders crowded into a few small rooms, and the

"parlor" served as kitchen, dining room, and bedroom. Instead, many working-class daughters socialized on streetcorners, rendezvoused in cafés, and courted on trolley cars. As one settlement worker observed, "Boys and girls and young men and women of respectable families are almost obliged to carry on many of their friendships, and perhaps their lovemaking, on tenement stoops or on street corners" (8). Another reformer found that girls whose parents forbade men's visits to the home managed to escape into the streets and dance halls to meet them. Such young women demanded greater independence in the realm of "personal life" in exchange for their financial contribution to the family. For some, this new freedom spilled over into their sexual practices (9).

In attending dance clubs, social club entertainments, and amusement resorts, young women took part in a cultural milieu that expressed and affirmed heterosocial interactions. As Belle Israels observed, "No amusement is complete in which 'he' is not a factor" (10). The heterosocial orientation

of these amusements made popularity a goal to be pursued through dancing ability, willingness to drink, and eye-catching finery. Many women used clothing as a means of drawing attention to themselves, wearing high-heeled shoes, fancy dresses, costume jewelry, elaborate pompadours, and cosmetics. As one working woman sharply explained, "If you want to get any notion took of you, you gotta have some style about you" (11). The clothing that such women wore no longer served as an emblem of respectability. "The way women dress today they all look like prostitutes," reported one rueful waiter to a dance hall investigator, "and the waiter can some times get in bad by going over and trying to put some one next to them, they may be respectable women and would jump on the waiter" (12).

A heightened sexual awareness permeated many popular amusements, including dancing. While waltzes and two-steps were common dance styles, working women's repertoire included "pivoting" and "tough dances." Pivoting was a wild, spinning dance that promoted a charged atmosphere of physical excitement; tough dances ranged from a slow shimmy, or shaking of the hips and shoulders, to boisterous animal imitations. Such tough dances as the grizzly bear, Charlie Chaplin wiggle, and the dip emphasized bodily contact and the suggestion of sexual intercourse. Many social clubs and amusement societies permitted flirting, touching, and kissing games at their meetings. One East Side youth reported that "they have kissing all through pleasure time, and use slang language, while in some they don't behave nice between [sic] young ladies" (13).

The extent of the sexual culture described here is particularly difficult to establish, since the evidence, drawn largely from the reports of middle-class reformers, social workers, and journalists, is too meager to permit conclusions about specific groups of working women, their beliefs about sexuality, and their behavior. Scattered evidence does suggest a range of possible responses, the parameters within which most women would choose to act and define their behavior as socially acceptable. Within this range, there existed a subculture of working

women who fully bought into the system of treating and sexual exchange, by trading sexual favors of varying degrees for gifts, treats, and a good time. These women were known in underworld slang as "charity girls," a term that differentiated them from prostitutes because they did not accept money in their sexual encounters with men. As vice reformer George Kneeland found, they "offer themselves to strangers, not for money, but for presents, attention, and pleasure, and most important, a yielding to sex desire" (14).

Such women were frequent patrons of the city's dance halls. Vice investigators noted a preponderant number of women at dances who clearly were not prostitutes, but were "game" and "lively;" these charity girls often comprised half or more of the dancers in a hall. One dance hall investigator distinguished them with the observation, "Some of the women . . . are out for the coin, but there is a lot that come in here that are charity" (15). Perhaps few women were charity girls or occasional prostitutes, but many more must have been conscious of the need to negotiate sexual encounters in the workplace or in their leisure time. Women would have had to weigh their desire for social participation against traditional sanctions regarding sexual behavior, and charity girls offered to some a model for resolving this conflict. This process is exemplified in a reformer's report of an attractive but "proper" working woman who could not understand why men friends dropped her after a few dates. Finally she receives the worldly advice of a coworker that social participation involves an exchange relationship: "Don't yeh know there ain't no feller goin' t'spend coin on yeh for nothin'? Yeh gotta be a good Indian, Kid—we all gotta!" (16).

For others, charity girls represented a yardstick against which they might measure their own ideas of respectability. The nuances of that measurement were expressed, for example, in a dialogue between a vice investigator and the hat girl at Semprini's dance hall. Answering his proposal for a date, she "said she'd be glad to go out with me but told me there was nothing doing [i.e., sexually]. Said she didn't like to see a man spend money on her and then get disappointed." Commenting on the charity girls that frequented the dance hall, she remarked that "these women get her sick, she can't see why a woman should lay down for a man the first time they take her out. She said it wouldn't be so bad if they went out with the men 3 or 4 times and then went to bed with them but not the first time" (17).

For this hat girl and other young working women, respectability was not defined by the strict measurement of chastity employed by many middle-class observers and reformers. Instead, they adopted a more instrumental and flexible approach to sexual behavior. Premarital sex *could* be labeled respectable in particular social contexts. Thus, charity girls distinguished their sexual activity from prostitution, a less acceptable practice, because they did not receive money from men. Other women, who might view charity girls as promiscuous, were untroubled by premarital intimacy with a steady boyfriend.

This fluid definition of sexual respectability was embedded within the social relations of class and gender, as experienced by women in their daily round of work, leisure, and family life. Women's wage labor and the demands of the working-class household offered daughters few resources for entertainment. At the same time, new commercial amusements offered a tempting world of pleasure and companionship beyond parental control. Within this context, some young women sought to exchange sexual goods for access to that world and its seeming independence, choosing not to defer sexual relations until marriage. Their notions of legitimate premarital behavior contrast markedly with the dominant middle-class view, which placed female sexuality within a dichotomous and rigid framework.

Whether a hazard at work, fun and adventure at night, or an opportunity to be exploited, sexual expression and intimacy comprised an integral part of these working women's lives. □

Endnotes

1. For a more detailed analysis, see Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn of the Century New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986).
2. Investigator's Report, Remy's, 917 Eighth Ave., February 11, 1917, Committee of Fourteen Papers, New York Public Library Manuscript Division, New York.
3. Belle Lindner Israels, "The Way of the Girl," *Survey* 22 (July 3, 1909): 489.
4. "A Salesgirl's Story," *Independent* 54 (July 1902): 1821; Lillian Betts, *Leaven in a Great City* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1902), 251-2.
5. New York State, Factory Investigating Commission, *Fourth Report*, vol. 4, 1585-86. Robert Woods and Albert Kennedy, *Young Working-Girls: A Summary of Evidence from Two Thousand Social Workers* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1913), 105.
6. Esther Packard, "Living on Six Dollars a Week," New York State, Factory Investigating Commission, *Fourth Report*, vol. 4, 1677-78. For a discussion of women's wages in New York see *ibid.*, vol. 1, 35; and *ibid.*, vol. 4, 1081, 1509. For an overview of working conditions, see Barbara Wertheimer, *We Were There: The Story of Working Women in America* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977), 209-48.
7. New York State, Factory Investigating Commission, *Fourth Report*, vol. 4, 1512-3, 1581-3; Ruth True, *The Neglected Girl* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1914), 59.
8. "Influences in Street Life," *University Settlement Society Report* (1900), 30; see also Samuel Chotzinoff, *A Lost Paradise* (New York: Knopf, 1955), 81.
9. On rejection of parental controls by young women, see Leslie Woodcock Tentler, *Wage-Earning Women: Industrial Work and Family Life in the United States, 1900-1930* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 110-3. For contemporary accounts, see True, 54-5, 62-3, 162-3; Betts, "Tenement House Life and Recreation," *Outlook* (February 11, 1899): 365.
10. Israels, "Way of the Girl," 486.
11. Clara Laughlin, *The Work-a-Day Girl: A Study of Some Present Conditions* (New York: Arno Press, 1974), 47, 145. On working women's clothing, see Helen Campbell, *Prisoners of Poverty: Women Wage-Earners, Their Trades and Their Lives* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1970), 175; "What it Means to be a Department Store Girl as Told by the Girl Herself," *Ladies Home Journal* 30 (June 1913): 8; Israels, "Diverting a Pastime," *Leslie's Weekly* 113 (July 27, 1911): 100.
12. Investigator's Report, Weimann's, 1422 St. Nicholas Ave., February 11, 1917, Committee of Fourteen Papers.
13. "Social Life in the Streets," *University Settlement Society Report* (1899), 32.
14. "Memoranda on Vice Problem: IV. Statement of George J. Kneeland," New York State, Factory Investigating Commission, *Fourth Report*, v.1, 403; see also Committee of Fourteen, *Annual Report* (1917), 15, and *Annual Report* (1918), 32; Woods and Kennedy, 85.
15. Investigator's Report, Remy's, 917 Eighth Ave., February 11, 1917, Committee of Fourteen Papers.
16. Laughlin, 50.
17. Investigator's Report, Semprini's, 145 W. 50 Street, October 5, 1918, Committee of Fourteen Papers.

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