

## An Excerpt from War Record: Dreams of a Stolen World, by Mark Zaccaria

*Read this description of the stirrings of teen-aged love in America, in the 1930's. This is the eye you will look through as you follow a young man of his times through adolescence to manhood and on the ultimate test of survival in War.*

When youngsters in the thirties got ready to go out to a Friday night dance at the Community House, the YMCA, or the JCC, their wardrobe was usually pretty well set. Nobody had a large range of outfits to choose from. This was an era that was just beginning to have enough extra resources to make leisure wear a reality. Most houses and apartments still didn't feature built-in closets, not because they couldn't be made but because they were considered unnecessary. Young people shared the same fashion ideals as their parents, and this was very convenient because frequently they had to borrow one or more items of formal clothing from them.

What the adolescent partygoer could choose, though, was his or her persona for the evening. In this area, everyone had a limitless assortment to select from.

While studying his features in the bathroom mirror and practicing key facial expressions, a young man went over his alternatives for a character.

"Tonight, I could be Clark Gable in *It Happened One Night*," he might announce to his reflection. "Cool and not too pushy, even if I'm being given the bum's rush by some dame. I don't feel overpowering enough to be Douglas Fairbanks in *The Private Life of Don Juan*," he might continue solemnly. "Or lucky enough," if he ended with a nod to reality. "There's always Charles Boyer in *Caravan*. Smooth and courteous with no fight in me at all. That drives the women wild," he would offer with complete confidence that he was correct. At length, some decision had to be taken. As he prepared to leave the sanctuary of the toilet, a final mental coin toss would be made. "Definitely Gable. I just have to remember to grin right."

Meanwhile, in a nearby apartment, a young lady he would meet at the dance was doing her own social calculus before the proscenium of an identical mirror.

"My features are too plain, but I could still be Katharine Hepburn, perhaps in *Spitfire*," she would say while watching herself analytically. It was an option that carried some risk. "If I really am that brazen, will they throw me out of the dance?" Perhaps something less controversial was in order. "I could be Maureen O'Sullivan in *Tarzan and His Mate*," she might continue critically. The social status implied by the title was appealing, but did she really want to put up with a strong, silent type lacking in the social graces? It took some thought. "No," she said at length. "I'll be Myrna Loy in *The Thin Man*. If I can find a reasonable copy of William Powell, at least he'll be dapper." The die was cast.

And when they got to the dance? The mating displays were certain to be legion and as heavily stylized and rigidly conformist as is any such behavior anywhere else in the wild. Birds parade to show off their plumage. Elk in the rut try to look as formidable as possible to frighten off competitors. Young city dwellers in the thirties demonstrated their command of fashionable manners.

They had all learned them at the movies, and they could each instantly judge how well anyone else had picked up the same things. To compete in this game, one had to be able to dance at least one of the popular steps. It was necessary to be able to chat engagingly about automobiles or even yachts. This was

easy since there was little chance that anyone actually had either of those conveyances. Without doubt, the most important displays to be mastered were those surrounding smoking and the cocktail.

People were brought up to assume that since life was short, anything that could provide a moment's pleasure was to be grabbed without a second thought. Smoking cigarettes was a relatively new social pastime, and the thought that women might smoke them in public was still shocking in many quarters. It was just the sort of *avant garde* craze that was made to be overstated by the movies. As for cocktails, the end of the era of prohibition was still fresh in the collective memory. America, which had been a nation of alcoholics in its early years, was then racing headlong to assert its regained choice in the matter social drinking. Even though the Community House dances usually began with alcohol-free punch, the revelers still used the dainty glasses to practice their style as if they contained the real thing.

Gable sauntered confidently through the front door of the Community House. His strides were a little long, and his shoulders moved forward and back with the rhythm of the motion. His left hand was thrust into the slash pocket of his double-breasted suit coat, the thumb extended to keep his arm at just the right crook. With his right hand, he pulled slightly at the brim of his hat, nodding to the matron who guarded the door to the dance floor.

"Thanks, ma'am." He grinned. "But I think I'll wear it tonight."

It was a social breach to keep the hat on indoors, but it was also a requirement if he was to remain in character.

Walking into the dimly lit room, he stopped for a moment, framed by the light streaming through the arched doorway. From that pose, he surveyed the crowd. There was one other lad wearing a snap-brim hat. In his case, though, both the front and rear brims were turned down.

*Leslie Howard*, he thought. *No contest.*

Taking in the rest of the room, he noticed what seemed to be an excess of Jimmy Cagneys. Gable had been a good choice. When he spotted several of his friends standing in a group, he moved coolly toward them, completing his entrance.

Gable's performance had not gone unnoticed. Standing with her friends, Myrna Loy watched his moves with approval. He certainly had the grin down perfectly, and that hat, right on the dance floor, showed a delicious dash of the rebel. Unconsciously, she smoothed her hair back in each direction from its center part, checking the spit curls by touch. Myrna made a mental note to see whether or not this Gable could dance. If so, she might have to abandon *The Thin Man* for *Cain and Mabel*.

As with all mating rituals, these were developed for the benefit of the females. The young women had been drawn instinctively to the values so emphatically expressed as important in pictures. It was so clear to them all. If a woman could get a man of the proper type, who knew all the hep routines and could provide for her in the lavish fashion of the silver screen, she would have everything that was important. Better yet, any other woman would be able to see that at a glance.

The young men, as always, were blinded by their sex drives and so used enormous energy to make themselves conform to the rituals. In almost all of them, though, there was a nagging recognition of the reality of the situation. The movies demanded that each of them be rich, smart, cocky but not too cocky, motivated by the highest ideals of patriotism, willing to fight for the right (hopefully with a lethal left), and capable of romantic love which, with the right woman, would be as strong as iron bands. Add to this

that they should be impervious to alcohol, able to fly a plane, brave enough to take on enemy agents, and be the close friend of a scientist or at least a policeman. It was impossible, of course. Most young men would start out with jobs that were relatively menial until they reached their thirties. The demands of apprenticeship for a craft and the economic depression effectively upped the age at which a man of the city got married to thirty-two or thirty-three years old in most cases.

In the years between his late teens and his wedding, an ordinary man would socialize as much or more with his group of male friends than he would with any one woman. As the male group gained importance, at least to its members, it was thought of as macho for a young man to be unattached. In fact, when he became attached to a woman, a man instantly dropped out of his group and was in uncharted social territory unless he could financially manage a marriage.

Knowing all this, the women were extremely careful in granting their favors. Sexual intimacy was a goal of all concerned, as it has always been, and it occurred as regularly as it has throughout the millennia. Its value was much different, though, than in the more permissive or informed ages that preceded and followed the 1930s. Pregnancy was the great regulator of sexual activity, and it was usually a young lady's job to be careful that if the worst occurred, she could live with the consequences.

When Myrna Loy stepped in front of Gable at the punch bowl, she seemed a little surprised. She hadn't seen him there and made an apology. Gable was gracious, however. He tipped his hat by touching the brim.

"Never you mind, my dear." He grinned. "Here. Let me help you with that."

Ever the gentleman, he ladled her up some punch. She accepted the offering with a smile and a knowing eye. They played a short scene. Then they talked a bit about school and family. When the band struck up a waltz, she was delighted to find that not only could he dance but that he took command of the team and moved them around the floor with confidence and smooth authority. She moved her left hand from his shoulder to the back of his neck. On opposite sides of the floor, this maneuver was analyzed closely. His boys exchanged knowing glances while her girls, though envious, wondered if she hadn't been a little too quick.

They liked each other's smell. They liked each other's moves. They especially liked what each of their sets of friends must be thinking about the match. For the two of them, at least, it had been a very successful evening. As they walked home separately, they could each almost imagine the credits rolling.