

No Man's Land



By ALICE-LEONE MOATS

Strangely enough, it doesn't matter whether it's the ladies' room of El Morocco, Roseland, or a tea room; the same things are said in all of them. First hair, then men, then clothes; those are the three favorite topics of conversation in the order of their importance. Of course, in a tea room it may eventually move on to servants and children, and there is sure to be a moment when one looks up to see a woman hesitating in the doorway as she holds a dreadful-looking little boy by the hand. "Can Junior come in here?" she will want to know. "He's only ten."

Aside from the belief that they dominate ladies'-room conversations, men suffer from another delusion—most of them seem to think that, however simple the restaurant, the town's most expensive decorator has been turned loose to convert the powder room into a veritable palace of Babylonian luxury. Actually, they would be amazed at the Spartan surroundings considered quite good enough for even the most spoiled darlings. Oftener than not, the decoration consists of white tiles, cream paint, and depressing green window shades hanging crooked.

The Rainbow Room, Waldorf, and Crystal Garden are modern and show a decorator's hand, but the only really plush dressing room we know is at Twenty-One. It is hung with chintzes, and has large facing mirrors; in fact, it is the only place we can think of where it is possible to see one's back in a mirror. All this fanciness seems to have been too much for at least one of the customers for, shortly after the new dressing room was installed, we remember going in and finding a word more commonly associated with men's rooms scrawled across the door with lipstick. The only time we have encountered any writing on the wall, we hasten to add.

Even the Colony has a very simple dressing room. It's all right, but one could scarcely call it a decorator's dream. At noontime it would be possible to go in blindfolded and know where one was because there are always at least six dogs tethered to the legs of chairs.

It has long been our plaintive cry that they talk about the equality of the sexes and then put ladies' rooms on the third floor while the mens' are always right next to the bar. Restaurant proprietors just have no southern chivalry. Or maybe they are so chivalrous that it has never occurred to them that any of their feminine clients could reach such a condition

No Man's Land

as to find three flights of stairs difficult to manage with any grace or even safety. If that is the case, Mr. Reuben and whoever owns the Kit Kat are candidates for Kentucky colonelcies, for their two establishments (which one never reaches before four in the morning), have the longest and steepest staircases in town. Tight or sober, worn out or fresh, it is practically impossible to get up or down without tripping at least once.

Aside from stairs and simple décors, most dressing rooms don't even have a decent light to make up by. There seems to be no happy medium between the dirty yellow bulb high up in the ceiling and some complicated indirect lighting which takes all color from one's face. There is never any drinking water—this may be deliberate, of course; no sense in having the clients take the edge off their thirst before they reach their tables—there is seldom any hand lotion; the soap is that disgusting liquid railroad-train variety; and there is never any place near the washbasins to set down one's purse and gloves. Wherever one puts them is always sure to be in someone else's way. "I believe this is yours?" the lady at the next basin will say with a sour look.

"Kindly remember the maid," reads a sign prominently displayed in one of the downtown resorts. We asked the maid whether or not this had been of any use, and she said, oh, yes. But we didn't notice any great enthusiasm on her part. Even printed signs won't do much in the way of getting quarters out of women, who are very poor tippers indeed. They will go to the most elaborate lengths to avoid dropping a coin in the plate so invitingly set out. And it is practically impossible to get their coats away from them. "I think I'll keep it to throw around my shoulders. There may be a draft," is the usual speech.

This feminine stinginess may account for the fact that, in the general run, the maids are bad-tempered and indifferent. Our favorite is in a Fifth Avenue hotel. She not only offers one a towel before one has stood around for five minutes with dripping hands, but takes her job so seriously that, on an average of three nights a week, she sees ladies home in taxis. This, when they have reached the point where they can do no more than murmur their addresses. At least once out of three times, she not only takes them home but undresses them and puts them to bed.

The most motherly maid in town turns out to be the one at Jimmy Kelly's, of all places. The entertainers use the same powder room as the guests. Actually, they seem to change their costumes somewhere in the vicinity of the kitchen and merely run upstairs for a bite to eat. It is a sort of commissariat, with the

No Man's Land

maid in charge of provisions. On our most recent visit, we found a bevy of fragile creatures we had just seen floating over the floor in half a yard of chiffon, grouped around the maid, drinking beer and eating pigs' knuckles.

It is a generally accepted fact that the girl at El Morocco has the greatest cross to bear. Nearly all the women who come in there are on a diet and the first thing anyone asks as she gets in the dressing room is whether Jean thinks she looks any thinner than she did the last time she was there. "I've lost three pounds in two days. Do you think it shows?" Jean, incidentally, is the only one we know of who is called by name.

The girl at the Stork Club undoubtedly gets in on the most gossip. This is one of the few places where there is a telephone in the powder room and she can listen in on fascinating conversations. Women who telephone from night clubs are either tight, attempting to fix up some way of giving their companion the slip to join the man they are calling, or involved in trying to make themselves heard while holding a hand over the mouthpiece so that a husband or family won't get the sounds of music and wonder what is going on at Aunt Kate's.

The maid at the Kit Kat is obviously a little bored by what she hears; it is so much the same. Always a wild chattering between two blondes who are worried that Ed Sullivan or Sobol has seen the married man they are with.

One would think that what with the boredom, late hours, and small tips any one of these maids would prefer to take a well paid job in a private house. But no. This sort of job apparently bestows a certain prestige and glamor. The colored girl who used to preside over the dressing room at Twenty-One before it was moved downstairs explained it all. She admitted she didn't earn much. "But working here," she said, "gives me a very fine social position in Harlem."