

STAGE

1937

NOT

for Debutantes

by Stanley Walker



Down at Jimmy Kelly's. From a painting by Reginald Marsh.

The laws of the State of New York, buttressed by certain local regulations, make it clear that it is illegal to serve malt, vinous, or spirituous beverages in New York City between the hours of four and eight A. M. Most places observe this rule; others will break it if they are acquainted with the thirsty customer, and if they are pretty sure no hostile police or inspectors for the Alcoholic Beverage Control Board are present. Many resorts in New York, however, stay open all night merely because the crowd is amused, or hungry, or because it seems the pleasant or inevitable thing to do.

The regulations governing the sale of liquor were predicated on the theory—by Bigotry out of Envy—that every man in his right mind, and every woman too, should be at home in bed by four o'clock in the morning. There is, to be sure, a plausible argument to be made in favor of such a theory, just as one might argue plausibly for abstinence, continence, exercise, and eight hours of sleep. The difficulty is that such a theory runs smack up against human experience. It falls down badly when put to the pragmatic test. People will stay up all night.

Four o'clock in the morning, the zero hour, is the time when old men and old women, their resistance low, curl out and die. It is a time when many babies are born. Roosters,



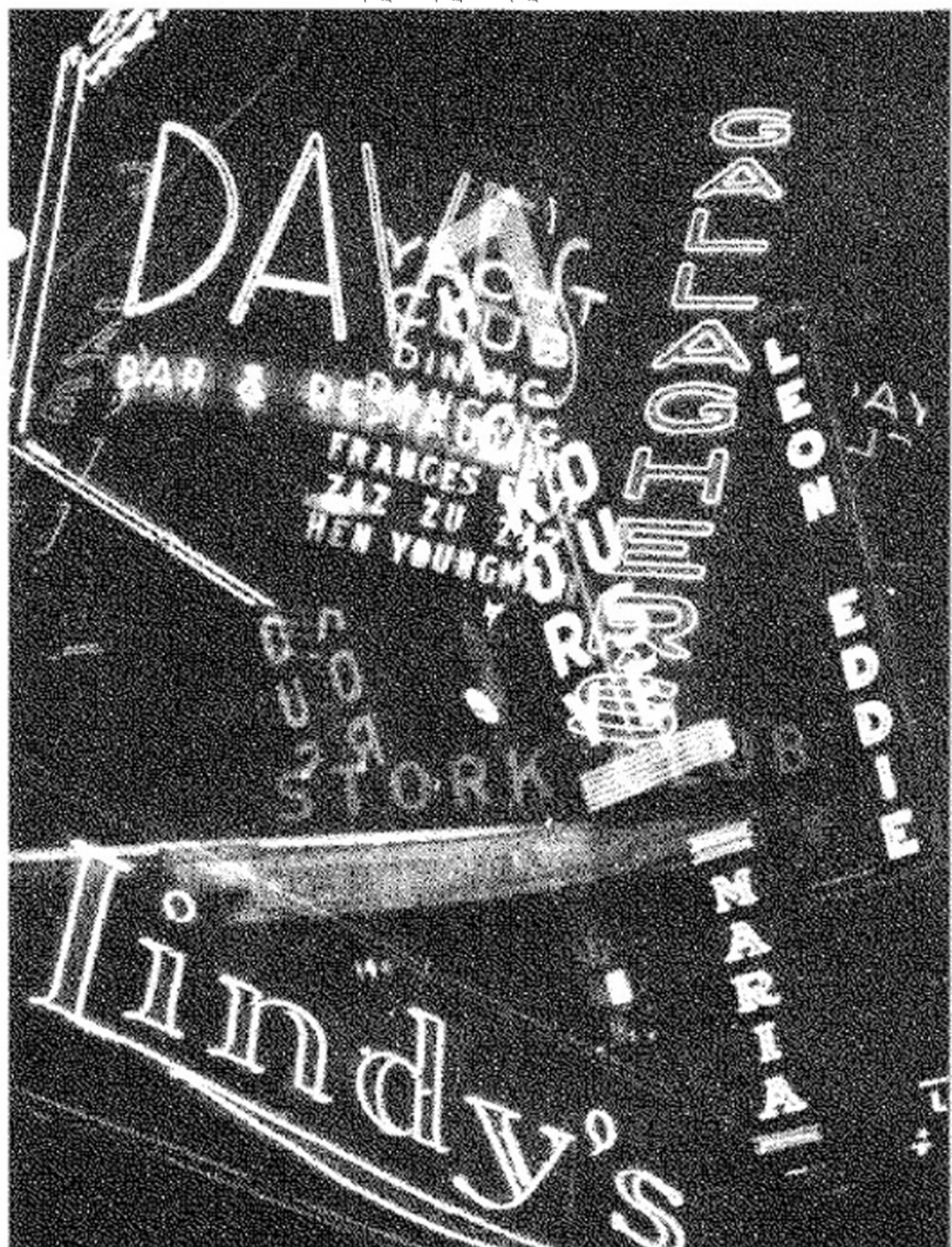
at four o'clock in the morning, often bestir themselves to crow, and the young colts in the fields lift their heads and begin to frisk. It is a time of death, birth, and unutterable boredom. But the customer who can still hold up his head and prepare to carry on until the sun blazes again will find that the four dry hours are rich in frightful and wonderful sights. It is, however, perhaps true that at four o'clock in the morning the average person is too tired to sleep, too drunk to love, and too proud to fight.

As everyone except the veriest clods must know, the senses are immeasurably heightened in the late morning hours. Bartenders reach down for philosophical tidbits which would have been beyond their reach earlier in the evening. Waiters grow more human, and are more inclined to betray their real natures—more's the pity. Arguments, fine-spun and passionate, reach that delicate balance between rare good sense and sheer insanity. Avowals of love and hatred have a deeper meaning.

For those who decline to go home at four o'clock, New York offers a variety of establishments where one may be happy, morose, puzzled, petulant, or romantic. It is not the purpose here to betray (blow the whistle) any place which serves drinks after four o'clock. Besides being bad form, such a betrayal would be unfair, because what happens one night in a place might not happen the next night. Indeed, immediately after the saturnalia of New Year's Eve, the police quietly notified virtually every establishment in the city that the no-drink law would be enforced, in the fine old phrase, without fear or favor. This can't be done completely for the simple reason that, as every student of the constabulary knows, there is nothing a cold and lonely policeman likes better, or needs more, around five o'clock in the morning, than a good healthy hooker of rye whisky. And such a policeman knows in his heart that what is good for him is quite probably good for other people. Therefore the tendency of the police inevitably is in the direction of tolerance, tolerance, and still more tolerance, until all hands are jolly.

Biographers of night life who have paid any attention to their business know that Mr. John Perona, the sleek proprietor of El Morocco, is a curious mixture of the strait-laced and the easy-going. That is to say, he is part prude, part hedonist. If four o'clock comes to his place at a time when a large part of the wealth, beauty, and wit of New York is still clustered about under his cellophane palms, it is a circumstance to cause neither regret nor pleasure. It is difficult, and a bit cruel, to chase them out. Why not let them stay until it is time for them to make up their own minds? After all, most of them are grown people and have their own lives to live.

Mr. Perona rarely has been one to pry into the private lives of his customers, or to tell them they must do thus and so. He takes life as he finds it, and he finds it rather amusing. Sometimes people stay very late at El Morocco, and there is yet no record of any definite harm having come of this practice—except, of course, the natural wear and tear on the



human body and the human mind which comes when people commingle in a night club. But gossip is likely to start anywhere, even in an all-night Coffee Pot or chili con carne joint (mighty fine places to see the dawn come up, by the way).

There is a set of handsome, well mannered playfolk in New York who go to several places every night, and who frequently leave El Morocco at around no-drink time, or shortly thereafter, and go to the Kit Kat Club, only a short distance away. People have been known to walk this distance without undue fatigue. The Kit Kat has what Grandpa used to call the doggondest set of entertainers ever heard of. They play things, and they sing. It is the next best thing to late Harlem in the middle part of the city. The girls, some of whom can sing eerie things, are for the most part handsome, light-colored girls. The place is a shade goofy, but friendly. It sometimes stays open until dawn, to the detriment of very few.

Very high in the list of late and daffy establishments is that operated by Jimmy Kelly (Signor John Di Salvio) at 181 Sullivan Street, way down in Greenwich Village. There, often, the sun rises and finds as motley a conglomeration of customers as the most fastidious seeker for the bizarre could dream of. The entertainment is a bit on the risqué side, but there is no case in the records of the Medical Examiner of anyone having died of shock in Signor Di Salvio's studio. To this little place (it is really pretty good-looking, and represents an enormous outlay of money) come newly wedded couples from here and there, vast numbers of couples who are not wedded and couldn't be under the peculiar laws of most of the States, Elks out on a binge, local boys who just sit around with their girls and talk out of the sides of their mouths—in short, all manner of strange folk, from the backbone of the country to some who (this is terribly harsh, but true) are a bit on the flotsam and jetsam side.

Jimmy Kelly (Di Salvio) is a wise but not very handsome entrepreneur who learned tolerance in a hard school; he came from the lower East Side of New York, was a prize-fighter, and once was a colleague of the late Nigger Mike Salter. Few men, unless deadened to environment, could go through such



an upbringing without having all the bigotry kicked out of them. Moreover, Mr. Kelly loves his mother, now ninety-two, who lives down in Hester Street, and it is axiomatic that a man who loves his mother is the salt of the earth and would not allow harm to come to any of his customers—harm to body or spirit.

The block in West Fifty-second Street between Fifth and Sixth Avenues does not go to sleep at four o'clock, though most of the quieter and snootier places close their doors then. The Onyx Club, in Fifty-second near Sixth Avenue, a goofy and unpredictable place (a young millionaire, cold sober, went in there the other night and was told that he was not wanted, though his behavior always had been perfect). Sometimes the Onyx stays open pretty late, depending on the crowd. Remembering that it was here that the immortal refrain *The Music Goes 'Round and Around* first became popular, it is easy to understand how it might be a trifle strange. College students and the younger drinking set are very fond of the Onyx. It is not a dump, but rather well done in decorations.

Also in West Fifty-second Street is Leon and Eddie's, packed until late with all sorts of carefree, clean-hearted souls, recently with an Amazonian woman bouncer to add tone. Both Leon and Eddie are quiet home boys addicted to only one vice: They sometimes send out cards to their friends which are slightly ribald. But there is nothing reprehensible about this when one remembers that it is all in a spirit of play.

Jack White's 18 Club in West Fifty-second Street also, on occasion, stays open late enough to satisfy most customers. It is inclined to be rowdy, as most places are late in the morning, and it is smoky and stuffy. Mr. White himself furnishes most of the entertainment, and, strange as it may seem, he is really funny. He likes to heckle guests, many of whom he knows by name. He has a cadaverous, melancholy face, and in his heart he probably is melancholy, as who wouldn't be looking at what he has to look at late in the morning (perhaps early in the forenoon would be a more apt way of putting it)? He speaks to habitués before and after his acts, and gets a lot of publicity one way and another. There's a girl or two in the place who actually can sing.

Sometimes around four o'clock an exotic mood strikes the ambitious customer, and likely as not he and his companions will wind up at the Monkey Bar at the Élysée at 56 East Fifty-fourth Street. This is an intimate establishment, frequented by slightly collegiate-appearing couples and by other groups who apparently never have quite made up their minds what, if anything, they are going to do about Life. The place has red-leather upholstery, and blue walls decorated with monkeys in eccentric poses. It seats from fifty to seventy-five persons. There are monkeys in cages back of the bar—not real ones, unfortunately, but monkeys in plush of all shapes and sizes. Piano players furnish most of the entertainment. Drinks come high. Students say there is something symbolical in the



monkey motif, but that may be only a conjecture.

Harlem holds its own, but the police, intermittently watchful of late entertainment there, have recently shut things down pretty tightly after four. Sound advice is not to go there too late. The atelier of Dickie Wells at 169 West 133rd Street, a basement place with an enormous long room, is one of the best-humored places in the city. Not a sneer or a growl in the place. Most of the customers are white, but there are enough Negroes present to make things cosy. The waiters really love their work, or seem to, and they talk amiably with themselves and the guests as they serve. The orchestra is hot—very hot indeed. Generally Dickie Wells stays open until six A. M. There is a cover charge of a dollar-fifty, but that does not include food and drinks. It is not as much of a night club as Small's Paradise or the Plantation or the Savoy ballroom, but the entertainment is all right and the food and drinks are sound enough.

Another very late spot, about which not a great deal has been heard, is the Club Yumuri, on Broadway between Fifty-second and Fifty-third Streets, operated by the amiable Elisio Grenet, a Cuban. The main attraction is a colored rhumba team, Rene and Stella, and much Spanish and Argentine music. Many Spanish people go there, and, like almost all Spaniards, they talk a lot and drink wine rather than hard stuff.

No one needs to be told that Lindy's sometimes stays open late at night and that the food is good (many of Mr. Damon Runyon's original characters may be seen here big as life, if that's any solace). Or that food may be had all night at Longchamps at Madison Avenue and Fifty-ninth Street (this place is very strict about serving drinks after hours, but it is a comfortable place to eat and talk during the dry four hours). Or that some of the best food anywhere may be had very late at Reuben's, the place run by the big sandwich tycoon in East Fifty-eighth Street. Reuben's draws a curious assortment of customers; the other evening one woman was seriously discussing going to Arizona to live, and a nightclub impresario who had come there with a lady after the closing of his own place rose and sang, with touching effect, *Empty Saddles in the Old Corral*. For sensible food, and a fair amount of quiet for the more contemplative souls, Reuben's is excellent.

For something a shade rougher, more informal, smokier: Nick's Tavern, at 140 Seventh Avenue South, dark and smoky, with good food, and carrying on in the artistic tradition of the old speakeasies; Danny's New Grill, opposite the News Building in East Forty-first Street, recently remodeled, and sometimes peopled with folks who jabber and drink too much; Jack Bleek's Artists and Writers Restaurant, 213 West Fortieth Street, where things close sharply at four o'clock but where customers are sometimes allowed to remain late if they happen to be engaged in table-cloth figuring or important debates. There are many other places of this type, but these are among the best. It is sad, but all



three are sometimes pretty well filled with men and women who write for the newspapers and other publications, poisoning themselves (alcohol is a narcotic) and frittering away what might otherwise be lovely and useful careers.

Another way to pass the arid four hours is to drive up to Central Park and gaze long upon the obelisk (Cleopatra's Needle) and ponder things. But this, like the contemplation of Grant's Tomb in the late morning hours, is not much fun except for a few determined introverts.

