

Barroom Nights

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Every night they come. Seven nights a week, soon after suppertime, they begin to drift in, and in a short while the barroom is full of people. Some come for only a few minutes — for one or two glasses of ale before the movies, lodge meeting, or work. But most of them come for the evening — to pass away the long hours between supper and bedtime, discussing the affairs of the world over their glasses of frothy ale or amber wine. Mostly they are men, who range themselves on the stools along the bar, and after ordering drinks, light their pipes or cigarettes and join in the talk. But some bring their women — wives, mistresses, sweethearts — and adjourn to the booths, aloof from the common stags at the bar. Nothing halts for long their coming. If an event of importance is going on elsewhere, they stop in afterwards; if it is raining, they appear clad in raincoats, carrying umbrellas; winter snow brings them in shaking their hats and stamping snow from their boots — and for a while, the weather, rather than politics or the war, is the topic of discussion. But always they come.

The conversation, enshrouded in smoke and the musty stench of beer, touches upon almost every conceivable subject, from science, politics, weather, sports, and work, to love, the movies, and — most popular of all — the war. The blaring of the radio does not disturb them; they simply raise their voices to be heard above its roar. And they talk. Always they talk. There is something about beer which loosens a man's tongue, makes vivid his ideas, and assures the meekest that he is the final authority on every subject.

After taking care of the weather, they tackle the political developments of the day, and decide conclusively just how the country should be run. Sometimes this occupies their attention for a long while; politics might even hold the floor until closing hour. But usually they have time to cover the nation's affairs and to go on to other topics — for the athletically-inclined, sports has its half-hour; the better-informed touch upon science and labor. And the more beers they consume, and the more war veterans in the group, the more likely it is that the war will eventually become the subject of discussion. Anecdotes of their experiences in France they never weary of telling. Usually, the discussion degenerates into a debate on who won the war, the Army or the Navy-, with the eventual decision depending upon the proportion of veterans of each service in the group.

They need no chairman. The closest approach to such a dignitary is the bartender, who does his best to prevent fights and is the final judge in all disputes. As he moves back and forth between bar and faucet, occasionally hurrying out to a booth with a tray full of glasses, he keeps a wary ear and eye on his subjects, offering a comment here, a joke there, and always on the alert for rising tempers and thickening tongues, which indicate that he must momentarily assume the role of bouncer if peace is to be preserved.

One meets many types of people in the barroom, most of them average American citizens, weary and bored after long days in the mill or chain store, drawn here for communion with their fellows, and to seek release from earthly troubles in King Alcohol's hazy realm. And while their discussions are the central point of the scene, it is the customers themselves who furnish the student of human nature with material for study.

Jimmy Murphy is probably the most typical member of the barroom family. A smallish, un-devout Irish Catholic, somewhere between late youth and early old age, he works as a laster in the town's big shoe factory. He is a widower, whose wife died five years ago, leaving him with six children. Every Saturday night, he goes to visit his "girl-friend" — a near-sighted, drab widow of his own age. In his younger days, Jimmy served variously as a sailor, construction riveter, bartender, and amateur boxer. He is one of the toughest members of the gang, and few people risk arousing his ire. Jimmy's formal education ceased at an early age, and his grammar shows it. He rolls his own cigarettes, keeps a careful eye on his bar account and never varies his weekly liquor bill by more than thirty cents either way. During the winter, on Sunday mornings, he pursues his favorite hobby-smelt-fishing through the river ice. He is a power in his neighborhood — an official in the Boat Club, and an annual, if never successful, candidate for a seat in the City Council.

Jimmy has six brothers, all very much like himself. One of them, Bill, the black sheep of the family, comes into the barroom occasionally, always drunk and broke; if he so desired, he could boast of having been thrown out more times than any other two customers. Bill has led a vivid life. He, too, was a sailor and riveter in his younger days, and his favorite tales are about his experiences while working on the Woolworth building. He is slightly younger than Jimmy, a bachelor who never appears with women and seems to have no feminine intimates. When they were younger, the two

brothers were rated as the toughest pair of barroom wreckers in town, and were the despair of every bartender because of their fiery tempers and crashing fists. However, advancing years have quieted their quarrelsome natures, and Jimmy, at least, now enjoys a reputation of respectability.

Two more Murphy brothers, cousins of the first pair, are included in the clientele. Fred and Al Murphy are a study in contrasts. Both are middle-aged and drunkards; but the resemblance ceases there. Fred was a sailor during the war, and since 1919 has worked as a coal teamster — between drinking jags. He is a veritable Jekyll and Hyde, quiet and unobtrusive when sober, but pugnacious and ugly after the first four beers. It is a simple matter to tell when Fred is drunk, even if he sits steadily at the bar. He infallibly demands of all around him, “What ship, Sailor?”; and when he is refused further drinks, howls, “What am I anyway, a Chinaman?” Few Saturday nights pass that the bartender does not have to throw Fred out, for his drunken mutter-ings are a threat to the peace of the gathering.

Al, on the other hand, served in the Army during the war, and was disabled in action; he receives a compensation from the government. Al has never been known to work, is drunk fully ninety-five percent of the time, and is the most amiable of the town’s souses. He never gets ugly or noisy, and never gets into trouble. Although he is entirely dependent upon his compensation for subsistence, and drinks incessantly, he always has money, and is canny enough to pay his rent immediately after receiving his government check, thus being assured of a warm bed. The story is told about Al that he once approached one of the town’s substantial citizens for a dime to buy a drink.

“All I have is a five-dollar bill, Al,” said the burgher.

“Oh, that’s all right,” replied Al, pulling a thick roll of bills from his pocket. “I’ve got change!”

Al and Fred are the ones who usually start the arguments as to whether the Army or the Navy won the war. They have been carrying on the same debate for years now, without reaching a definite decision, and always manage to embroil the entire group in the controversy.

One of Al Murphy’s better friends is Johnny Carey, another frequent guest at the evening’s festivities. Johnny is one of the biggest of the customers, and is easily the most stupid. However, in spite of his meager intelligence, he’s a congenial sort of fellow who doesn’t bother anybody unless he gets very, very drunk. Johnny’s sale means of support is the odd jobs he does around the neighborhood. Unfortunately, money, to him, is measured in terms of the number of beers it can buy. He never seems to eat; yet his tremendous body remains as bulky as ever.

Sometimes, after a heavy snowstorm, when he doesn’t want to take time off himself to shovel, Louis, the bartender, sends Johnny out to clean off the sidewalk. That’s one thing the huge drunkard is a master at wielding a shovel. He works his way tirelessly through a snowdrift in less time than any other two men could do the job. Then he comes stomping into the barroom. “How’s that, Lou? Good job, huh?” And he sits down at the bar to collect for his labor-in beer.

After he has reached a certain point in his drive towards alcoholic saturation, Johnny can be influenced to favor the group with a song, which he renders in a hoarse baritone rumble. His favorite number is a simple little ditty entitled: “Mother Sleeps Well Now That Father’s Washed His Feet!”

Probably there are thousands of Johnny Carey’s, staggering in and out of barrooms all over the world—drifting from job to job, bothering nobody, content if they have enough liquor in them to keep their bellies warm and their minds unburdened by earthly cares.

But for every barfly like Johnny, who doesn’t bother anybody, there’s a genuine pest, like the Count, who makes a nuisance of himself. Nobody knows what the Count’s real name is. He suddenly appeared in the establishment one night last winter, dressed in a mangy, black fur coat; the collegiate pork pie hat that he wore sat incongruously atop a dirty, wrinkled face. From that time, this middle-aged juvenile has burdened the barroom with his daily attendance. He is a walking copy of *Adventure Stories Magazine*, equipped with organs of speech. For the Count has been everywhere and seen everything. Any topic being discussed at the bar reminds him of an experience he once had, and he is not at all loath to recite it in detail to anybody within ear range. Nothing discourages him. When, as frequently happens, his neighbors pick up their drinks and move to the other end of the bar to escape his tireless tongue, he simply moves down the line to the next man, and begins the narrative again. Naturally, all the customers hate him, and urge Louis to stop him from coming in. However, there’s not much that Louis can do about it, for the liquor regulations require him to serve any customer, unless the customer is intoxicated. So Louis simply doesn’t listen to the Count’s recitals, and finds solace in throwing him out when the pest gets drunk enough.

Tony Rosino is another of the pest collection. During Prohibition days, Tony was a petty bootlegger; but repeal put an end to his business and forced him to go to work. Tony reads books. Tony has opinions. Moreover, his opinions are always the correct ones. That’s the main trouble with this loud-voiced little Italian. Arguing with him is as fruitless as trying to out-drink him, and he has the largest capacity of the entire group of customers. He dismisses contrary views by the simple expedient of not listening to them. And the harder his opponent tries to get an idea across, the louder does Tony shout his own borrowed theories, and the more violent do his gestures become. Louis has long since given up

trying to reason with him, and agrees hastily with every statement that he makes. Moreover, he does his best to make the other customers see the hopelessness of arguing with Tony. After all, a man's head can stand only so much shouting!

One thing about the barroom's clientele, it doesn't vary a great deal. The majority of the customers have been coming in regularly for years, and will be faithful patrons five years from now, in all probability. This is easily understood. The handy location, halfway between home and downtown; the high quality of the beer and wine served; the friendly, neighborly atmosphere of the place—all these factors make for satisfied customers. Probably the easy credit has a great deal of influence here, too, for soft-hearted Louis rarely refuses a request for "a few beers till payday."

For some of them, however, payday never comes; and these are the ones who eventually leave empty stools at the bar. They come in at first, regularly, and pay cash for their drinks. Then, one week, money will be scarce because of "sickness in the family", or "a slow week in the shop"; and they ask, "Will it be all right to cuff a few till Friday, Louis?"

Sure enough, the genial bartender, who never seems to learn from experience, grants their request. And when Friday comes, they pay as promised. This goes on for many weeks while they build up increased credit; and then, one Friday, when an unusually large sum is owed, they don't bother to come in to pay. As far as collection is concerned, Louis may consider them dead; some other barroom now enjoys their trade. Deadbeats of this type are responsible for many of Louis' gray hairs; yet he never seems to be able to resist a plea for credit.

Fortunately, there are comparatively few of these; the majority of the customers are honest, and pay their bills with heartening regularity. Take, for instance, Normie Gauthier. Normie has been a regular member of the barroom family for six years now, and has never missed on a payment; he's probably the best customer that Louis has. No-body knows much about Normie, except that he works in the shop across the street and lives somewhere uptown. A portly, neat widower, about sixty, Normie talks little of himself and seems satisfied to be let alone. He has a steady routine which varies little from day to day. Once in the morning before work, once at noon, and once when the day's work is finished, he hurries in for a hastily-downed glass of beer, and then rushes out again. After work, he goes home to change his sooty overalls for a tidy business suit, has supper in a downtown restaurant, and returns to the barroom for the evening assemblage.

Sometimes he brings along Yvonne, his married girl-friend. Yvonne was probably a very attractive woman in her younger days; but now she is growing old and uses too much makeup to cover a face aged by dissipation. Most of the time she is very drunk, which makes her look even worse. It's a common sight to see her and Normie coming down the street in the evening — she staggering along, ten yards ahead of patient Normie, who always catches up with her at the door. (She will not walk with him on the street, because of the fear of being seen by her husband.) They retire to a booth in the far corner of the room, Normie orders "Two beers, Lou" — he never cares what brand he drinks — and they spend the long evening there, drinking countless glassfuls, and chattering to each other in fluid French.

Sometimes, when the place is crowded, Yvonne and Normie sit together on one seat, and make room in the booth for Belle and Frankie, another regular couple. Frankie Donnelly is a handsome, superbly built young man in the early twenties; Belle Kelleher, his companion, is twice his age, and looks every bit of it. Like Yvonne, Belle was rather a good-looking woman in her youth; but too much liquor and food, and not enough exercise, have ruined her figure and features alike.

Belle has had more than her share of hard luck—married at the age of seventeen, she soon lost her husband in a railroad accident. Coming shortly after her young son had been drowned while swimming, this tragedy made her a broken woman, whose sole pleasures were in liquor and a long line of male companions. Frankie is the latest gigolo. It's rather an ideal arrangement for him, enabling him as it does to satisfy an appetite for liquor and a desire for fine clothes far beyond the means of the average construction-laborer of his class. All that he has to do in return for his spending money is to devote his free time to a shrill-voiced, drunken old shrew, who pays the bills from her dead husband's insurance money. Possibly he even cares a bit for Belle. He must, for they've been together now for three years without a serious split.

For a while, Belle owned a car—a shiny new coupe, which Frankie drove them around in whenever he was not working. Owning this car made it easier for Belle to satisfy her penchant for attending funerals; she hasn't missed a Catholic funeral in ten years. But Frankie's drunken driving got them into so many accidents that his license, after a crash into a motorbus had completely wrecked the coupe, was finally revoked. Now they walk from barroom to barroom.

Every night, except when Frankie gets too drunk during the day and fails to call for her, the two stroll in. If all the booths are full, they stand nervously near the door, whispering to each other and darting indignant glances at the occupants of their usual corner booth. The minute a booth is vacated, they hurry over to claim their rightful property. But usually they come in early enough to find the corner booth empty, and take possession of it. Then — "Hello, Louis. Two Kreugers, please."

The ale is served, and the evening vigil is on. Belle considers herself duty-bound to thoroughly inspect each customer that comes in. When the door opens and a new arrival enters, she pokes her head around the corner of the booth and

surveys him curiously, confiding her impressions to Frankie in an excited whisper. A stranger occupies her attention until she finds out who he is, and all available information on his life history and family. Or, if the new arrival is a friend, he merits a wide smile, a comment on the weather: "Gosh, ain't it cold tonight! Brrrr!" And her fat shoulders shudder. "I wish I was still down in Florida; you bet it's nice and warm down there! Come on in here, Bill, and have a drink with me and Frankie. Sit right here!"

After three or four drinks, Frankie begins to become painfully con-scious of his speech. He went to high school for a half-year before being expelled, and feels, naturally, that his superior education should be indicated by flawless grammar. So he speaks slowly and carefully, choosing his words with great pains, and mispronouncing most of the longer ones. And woe to him who offers a correction! That infallibly brings on an argument, with Frankie's huge fists backing up his con-viction that he is right.

Belle has the larger liquid capacity of the two. Or maybe she just gets a later start than Frankie. But anyway, it's usually Frankie who first begins to talk thickly and slump in his seat. Or, if he has been mixing beer and hard liquor, he gets nasty and starts scouting around for a fight. Few are the nights that he doesn't start some sort of row, and Louis sometimes has to call on the police to quiet him down.

Fights in the barroom are one of the greatest problems that Louis has to face; for a fight usually causes a great deal of noise, which is likely to bring a policeman on the run. And if the rows become frequent, the liquor commissioners will suspend the barroom's license for a week or more, which is damaging both to the revenue and reputation of the enterprise.

That's one of the reasons that Louis keeps such a careful eye on his customers — so that they won't be served beer when they've "had enough". With some of them, however, it's often difficult to tell just when they are drunk, especially if they're sitting down and not talking much.

One night, Frankie Donnelly and Belle Kelleher, apparently quite sober, strolled in and ordered a pair of drinks. Thinking that they were all right, because of Frankie's steady gait, Louis served them and retired to the kitchen to wash some dishes. A minute later he heard Frankie's voice raised in an angry bellow.

"What in hell are you staring at, buddy?"

Louis rushed out to find the rugged Irishman glaring at a man who was sitting at the bar. The man, a stranger, had turned around to look at Belle, and Frankie, apparently thinking his gaze insulting, was on his feet with a challenge before the stranger could withdraw his glance.

"Keep your eyes to home, Mister," growled Frankie, "or I'll fix them so that you won't be able to see at all!"

No real man was going to accept this invective humbly, and the stranger, a big farmer who had had a few drinks himself, was no excep-tion. He looked Frankie slowly up and down, rose unsteadily to his feet, and spat on his clenched fists.

"Listen, you thick Mick," he said hotly, "I don't take that kind of talk from nobody!" And he drove a roundhouse right at Frankie's jaw. The fun was on! Shaking off the effects of the blow, Frankie rushed at the stranger fiercely. The rest of the customers, who had been watching the episode in stunned surprise, came to life.

"Sock him, Frankie. Kill the dirty hick!"

"Come on, stranger, hit him again! That a boy, sock him!"

Staggering back from a hard body blow, Frankie crashed into the corner of the booth, upsetting a glass of beer into the shrieking Belle's lap. Louis rushed in between the two men, reaching out his arms to push them apart. "Listen, you guys, cut that out or I'll call a cop! If you want to fight, go outside. This is a respectable place!"

The stranger brushed him aside angrily, and lunged for Frankie again. The latter ducked, swung a terrific right as his opponent sprawled off-balance, and the stranger slumped to the floor, moaning. Sweeping his hair back from his sweating brow, Frankie turned raging eyes towards the bar, shouting, "Anybody else want to get tough? Come on, I'll take you all on together!"

Nobody said a word. Frankie glared around for a moment, and then turned towards his sobbing consort. "Come on, Belle. Let's get the hell out of here!"

With events of this sort a frequent occurrence, it's no wonder that Louis gives a relieved sigh when closing time finally arrives. Which brings up another problem. By that time, many of the customers are pretty drunk, and don't want to go home.

"Aw, whaddy say, Lou, just one more drink. Cripes! Flanagan is at the other end of his beat by now. He'll never know what time you close up!"

They slap a dime down on the bar, but Louis is adamant. He's been on his feet since seven in the morning and is quite ready for bed. Besides, he knows that they won't be satisfied with only one more drink, but will become harder to get rid of every minute; and he doesn't care to chance being caught breaking the closing regulation. So he ignores their entreaties, and starts washing glasses. And when the last one has given up and staggered out, he locks the door hastily and begins sweeping, muttering under his breath, "Why the devil didn't I go into the clothing business instead of this damned racket? At least, they can close up at six o'clock!"