

FERD and CLEO

The young couple considered themselves very fortunate. Ferd Bruck and Cleo Lambridis had found a table for two in the downstairs intimacy of the Coconut Grove's extremely crowded Melody Lounge on this Saturday night. And it was a rather special night for the couple since Ferd would be leaving for duty with the U.S. Army in but a few short days. As they sipped their drinks, engaged in small talk, and listened to the tinkling piano music, Ferd became aware of what seemed a small disturbance in the far corner of the lounge.

In that far corner sat Maurice Levy, his wife, Jean, and two friends. Their party had arrived at the Grove about 9:15 P.M. and had waited ten minutes before finding a table in the rear corner of the crowded lounge. The small disturbance Ferd Bruck noticed was, in reality, a discussion between a couple seated next to the Levys and a busboy. It appeared that an electric light bulb located within a coconut husk on the artificial palm tree had been unscrewed by the romantic young man to afford more privacy with his cuddling companion. Maurice and Jean Levy and their friends looked on in amusement.

The head bartender, noticing that the normally semi-dark corner had become almost pitch black, shouted to the nearest busboy, "Boy! Put that light back on!" The young busboy hurried to the corner and, excusing himself for brushing by the Levy party, stepped upon the banquette and lit a match to determine the exact location of the unlit bulb. Locating the bulb, he tightened it into its socket and watched it re-light. Climbing back down to the floor, he carefully ground the match under his heel as he had been instructed.

The three bartenders and two cashiers working behind the nearby octagonal bar totally ignored the activity of the young man, as they were fully and frantically engaged in providing service to a packed house with patrons standing three and four deep around the entire bar.

Ferd and Cleo, watching idly from across the room, saw the busboy step to the floor and at virtually the same time noticed what appeared to be a flicker from the top of the artificial palm tree. As they stared in fascination the flicker blossomed into a small flame licking upward to the satin draped ceiling.

Maurice Levy, seated beside the palm tree, glancing upward thought for an instant he saw a bright, momentary glow and, as he stared he saw a small, dark spreading black hole appear in the fabric of the ceiling, widening, widening – until suddenly there was a wisp of flame!

The head bartender from his station at the center section of the bar heard a patron say, "There's a fire over there!" He vaulted over the bar hurrying into the corner where the palm tree had now begun to burn when, in his words, "There was a flash!" He shouted to his fellow employees behind the bar to pass him some water quickly. The flames had progressed into the fabric covering the ceiling and were insidiously spreading outward in an arc from the corner. Despite the efforts of both bartender and busboy the fire was

gaining in intensity. And now, pieces of burning satin from the ceiling were peeling off and falling on the crowd below. What had seemed an amusing incident had suddenly become cause for alarm.

Because their little table was located on the Piedmont Street side of the lounge, Ferd and Cleo were among the first to start into the stairwell upward to the Foyer. It was already filling with fingers of flame. As he held Cleo close to him, Ferd hugged the wall of the stairs and the couple bent low to avoid the searing heat now burning their heads and ears. In pain, they reached the top of the stairs and turned towards the Foyer and the revolving door exit while darts of ever-increasing flame spurted over their heads.

The flames and unburned gases were now gaining control of the Foyer and Lobby seeking oxygen for complete combustion. The heat was intense! And through this tunnel of torture, Ferd, still holding Cleo tightly to his side, rushed toward the panicked crowd milling about in front of the revolving door main exit. In pain, but with purpose, the couple forced their way through the throng to the exit door which seemed to be jammed but, suddenly, as Ferd stated, "Because we were so skinny," the pair was through the exit and into the cold safety of the Piedmont Street sidewalk. Both were in shock, burned, in pain, but alive.

In pain, Ferd hailed a cab directing a hasty trip to the Boston City Hospital. On arrival Ferd, with burned hands, attempted to reach for his wallet to pay the fare. The cabby said, "Forget it, Buddy, I'm going back there to see if I can help!"

Patrons

Fred Bruck

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