

HENRY (COOCH) GAW ----- patron

It sometimes seems that spontaneous happenings, as opposed to those well-planned in advance, result in the most memorable and enjoyable of times; and this was exactly what was happening to the three close married couples from the tiny Massachusetts town of Clinton. The six, Bob and Eleanor Coleman, Joe and Catherine Salmon and Henry and Loretta Gaw during their weekly get-together decided they would like to attend the upcoming football game in Boston featuring their favorite College of the Holy Cross versus the favored and formidable Jesuit rival Boston College. The improbable chance of obtaining tickets to the "sold out" event was, by chance, overcome with a quick telephone call to a close friend and prominent Holy Cross alumnus. With tickets in hand, weekend reservations were confirmed at Boston's stately Copley Plaza Hotel. Dinner reservations for Saturday evening at the renowned Latin Quarter nightclub were placed and the group anticipated an exciting, fun filled weekend!

On the bleak rainy Saturday the shocking result of the final score of the heralded football game between the two bitter rivals brought nothing but joy and exultation to the Clinton six, since their underdog favorites had drubbed the highly acclaimed Boston College Eagles by a 55 to 12 upset. Happily leaving the stadium the little group dispelled the chill and dampness of the rainy afternoon with a few celebratory cocktails while looking forward to an evening of pleasant dining and entertainment at the plush Latin Quarter.

On arrival at the nightclub their expectations were dashed when they were informed by the Maitre D that there had been "a mistake made in communications, their reservation could not be honored and they could not be accommodated" at the already jam-packed club.

Disappointed but undaunted, the little group wandered through the theatre district seeking admission to a half dozen clubs and restaurants but, with growing concern, they were turned away from each one because on this Saturday night it seemed as if everyone was out celebrating. As they were leaving the filled to capacity Mayfair Club on Broadway, they saw, across the street, the glowing neon sign of the Cocanut Grove nightclub. It was now well after 9:00 P.M. and their immediate concern was for a hot and satisfying dinner before returning to their hotel.

Entering the ornate Foyer through the Piedmont Street revolving door main entrance the three couples approached the tuxedoed headwaiter who stated, "we are very crowded", but after Bob Coleman quickly pressed a sizeable tip into the man's hand, they were informed that there would be "but a five minute wait for their table." And in a very short time they were ushered to a table located on the ultra-chic "Terrace", usually the province of the wealthy and famous.

After ordering a round of drinks they were able to enjoy an unobstructed view of the entire Dining Room, Caricature Bar and the stage upon which the second floor show was about to be presented. In response to a request for dinner menus, they were informed by

their waiter that there was virtually no food remaining for dinner since the crowd in attendance was "twice what would normally be there", but, he said, he could try to provide something in the way of sandwiches. The famished six quickly placed their orders and settled back to what promised to be a top-notch floor show, a fitting climax to a memorable day.

Within a very few moments Henry, while sipping his drink and listening to the animated conversation, became aware of a crowd "shuffling around" near the Lobby area. Facing in the direction of the main entrance and having a clear view he saw "a trickle of flame over the Lobby area." He said quietly to his tablemates, "There's a fire over there, probably a small one, but I don't think this is a good place to be." In the very next instant flames flashed across the entire ceiling of the Dining Room. "It just went WHOOSH, right across, all flames." Reaching across the table Henry grabbed Loretta and, pulling her to her feet said in a voice tinged with anxiety, "Hold onto me, put your arms around my waist." Pulling the terrified girl with him Henry jumped down the few Terrace steps to the main floor level and looked briefly in the direction of the Foyer where he saw "a mass of people clawing and pushing each other." Clutching Loretta tightly he turned away from the direction of the milling mob and started towards the rear of the now-flaming nightclub.

A cloying, blinding, impenetrable pall of smoke dropped instantly from above and sounds of panic erupted from all directions. Choking and blinded, Henry doggedly moved towards the rear of the Dining Room, attempting to hold his breath while clinging tightly to his terrified wife. Somewhere in the rear of the building Henry knew there had to be an exit – he knew that from his high school days as an after school usher at the tiny neighborhood theatre in Linton where the Manager (a call-fireman) had repeatedly insisted on daily inspection of the function and access of exit doors.

Now burning fragments of the fabric ceiling were raining down upon the screaming crowd. Loretta, with her head tucked tightly against Henry's shoulder, was actually biting him in an attempt to gain a breath of air. Crashing blindly against over-turned tables and chairs, bumping into panicked people seeking safety and sensing the skin on his hands and face burning to the point of bursting he staggered on until, realizing he was losing consciousness he saw, through a wall opening, light from outside the building. He was close to the Shawmut Street exit door! Out of the darkness the strong hands of a Boston firefighter propelled him through the open doorway into the street and the cold, clean air of the November night. Henry sprawled, face-down, into the street with his badly burned hands splitting open with agonizing pain. But he had been separated from his beloved Loretta and, turning back into the inferno, he rushed through the open exit door only to be confronted by a burly firefighter who softly said, "You're going the wrong way, buddy," and Henry was once again thrown into the winter cold of Shawmut Street. Now, with his torn hands bleeding, as he raised himself to rush headlong into the Coconut Grove to reach Loretta there appeared in the blackened doorway two large firefighters with the diminutive burned, semi-conscious, but still alive Loretta.

Hours later the firefighters would remove the four charred bodies of the Colemans and the Salmons.