Drink Up Darling

by Katrina Dessavre

Darling Valentine's pale legs shone in the dark, a beacon for the car driving without headlights along a tree-lined row of brownstones. She sat on the front steps of one, listening to faint sounds of drunken jeers and high-pitched laughter accent a scattered piano melody. The still air, thick with the day's heat, lay on her skin, digging out streams of sweat that mingled with powder and dropped onto the dusty pavement. She began tapping one of her old numbers to distract from her swelling feet.

“Is this O'Connell's?”

Two men stood at the bottom of the stairs wearing black velvet jackets.

“We're the new talent.” One of them took off his straw boater to a bald head glistening with sweat. “Chubby Miller and the Arcadians. Pleasure to meet you, Miss. I'm Chubby, vocals, and these are the Arcadians.”

He loosened his bow tie and pointed to his companion. “What's left of them anyway. Our piano man and trumpeter are tied up with the Follies tonight. Now it's just me, Walter here, and his saxophone.”

Walter put down his suitcase gently and opened it just enough to reveal the red velvet interior reflected in polished brass. Darling walked down to get a better look. They were a few inches shorter than her and looked over two hundred pounds.

“Do you hear that?” she said, pausing to let them catch a few verses of Milly and Mabel's off-key duet. “That's the sound of thirty saps and burned-out nobodies all sitting in a crowded basement without killing each other. I'd like to keep it that way, at least until the end of the night. Now if you want to play here, you've got to keep them all interested in something other than their petty problems and that means the Saxby sisters have to keep acting like fools.”

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Chubby took a handkerchief from his pocket and dabbed his fleshy face. “We want everybody to have a good time same as you, Miss.”

“Well then follow the music, boys. Let's hope you can do better.”

She didn't recall talk of hiring new talent. Gene wouldn't stand for it without a fight. But Lesley's men had pulled up farther down the block. She waited until the basement door closed and motioned to the car.

Streetlight illuminated scratches and dents in the Hudson's burgundy surface. Those weren't there last time. She crossed the pavement and opened the side door.

“How dare you damage this beautiful car? You can't even pass this off as an accident. And I was just thinking I might try it out myself. Now where's my —”

She stopped, realizing that she recognized only three of the four faces.

Little Francis sat in the back seat, twirling his pistol with the greedy pleasure of a boy just getting to grips with his first weapon. Pretty Boy Sid watched him nervously, grabbed the gun and shoved him out of the car. Resting one foot on the ledge they lifted up the cushion and pulled out a brown leather suitcase. Darling suspected that it cost more than the cargo inside, but Sid and Francis disappeared through the iron gate before she got a chance to examine the fine detailing.

Still at the wheel, Tommy Nash leaned out and looked at the damage.

“I almost got nicked myself and here you are worrying about the car,” he said. Tommy always had a casual attitude towards death, which, she suspected, kept him alive. “If you get me an Old Fashioned I'll tell you all about it.”

“How do I know you haven't sold out for the overboard stuff? Did you hear about what happened over on Sullivan? Two dead, one paralyzed.”

“It's the finest Canadian whiskey around,” a voice said from the passenger seat.

Tommy lit a cigarette.

“Don't insult the boss, Darling. We went through a lot of trouble to find the good stuff for you.”

So that was Lesley Hampton. The Shadow for those who admired his ability to keep New York wet and his name out of the papers. The Snake for others who suspected he was just good at covering his tracks. During their last year at Princeton, a few weeks after the country went dry, he and Tommy stole the Hampton family's Baby Grand to drive a paying stranger up past the Canadian border. The passenger turned out to be a bootlegger and offered to show them the closest stills. They bought a ten dollar case in Montreal and sold it for ninety in Manhattan. With the profits and a few more trips with the Baby Grand, Lesley built a fleet of cabs that delivered drunk debutantes back to their townhouses without a sound and Wall Street big shots to the clubs that welcomed their liberal spending habits. Rumors circulated that, for his wealthiest clients, he dipped into a vast storehouse on his family's estate.

Lesley was the only man whose whiskey flowed into Park Avenue penthouses and tenement basements. He had enough New England blood in him to gain the trust of his kind, but instinct for making a profit led him to cast a wider net. That's why he continued to deal with O'Connell. While a magnate might start worrying about his reputation, an Irishman would never let anything stand between him and a drink.

Darling knew all this from snippets of slurred conversation and brief exchanges with Tommy when she gave him what he wanted. But it was only after Lesley got out of the car, walked around the front, and stood next to the cloud of smoke half-covering Tommy's face, that she could see why he was different from any bootlegger she had ever met.

He didn't have Tommy's aggressive charm, or his large, athletic build. The precise tailoring of his cream colored suit, lined with thin, pale blue stripes, suggested a slight figure more accustomed to a game of polo than a back alley. His eyes were such a light shade of muddled blue that they seemed to disappear into the whites.

Burning with controlled ambition among his delicate features, they gave the impression that he was capable of reciting poetry before ordering someone killed.

“Is Clive in tonight?” Lesley's manner of speaking, like his liquor, traveled along the New England coast.

“Why? Do you want to get him into trouble again?”

“In a way, yes.”

“He'll be happy to hear that. He's been restless since getting out of Sing Sing. It's only been a few weeks and his old habits are starting to show.”

“Good. I want him to work for me.”

“And you're not worried he's going to scare off the old society ladies?”

“He'll be the highlight of their lunch conversations for months to come.”

He turned to Tommy.

“Keep the car ready.”

Darling watched him move towards the door with a light, almost musical step.

“Why is he suddenly so interested in Clive?”

“I don't talk before my first full glass.”

“Never mind that. I'll get it before you leave. Tell me. Is it because he's afraid Clive will be snatched up by one of his old buddies, if there are any left?”

“He wants to make the Hampton Club the finest in New York. Dancers swimming in fountains of champagne and a jazz riff for every politician willing to fish one out. Intoxicated chaos disguised as sophistication. Those are his words, not mine.”

“So he's abandoning his cabs?”

The otherwise empty street amplified Tommy's easy laugh into a harsh, almost grotesque sound.

“You know, I wish I could get away with wearing so little.” He paused, settling deeper into the cushions now starting to fray at the seams. Her suit consisted of high waisted shorts that were part of an old sailor costume and a black corset embellished with a white

beaded collar, given to her by a pansy tearful that it didn't fit him anymore.

“No, he's not jumping ship. Would you, if you had a fleet of five hundred already in place? He doesn't have the muscle for dealing with thugs like Francis and Sid. There are more of them now than ever. That's why he needs Clive.”

“And what are you going to do?”

“Concerned?”

“Only about my whiskey.”

“Since you asked, I'm not working for that pisswit who can't think two steps outside guns, women and boxing. Lesley suggested I work the bar, but can you imagine, me, taking drink orders?”

“You're right. Half of them wouldn't get past the counter.”

“Why don't you join us? How much longer are you going to waste your legs in a place like this?”

She reached for his cigarette, took two puffs and snuffed it out with her heel. Walking down the five small steps to the basement door, she paused to look at the smoke in its last efforts to escape the pavement. The music had stopped and she heard only a muffled rumble more dangerous than outright revelry. She waited for a gunshot that would give her a reason to get in the car and leave West 10th for higher ground. Five seconds was enough for her hand to turn the handle and reach for the railing, well-oiled by the grease of steadying hands. Still air followed her into the dark staircase, now layered with the pungent fragrance of smoke, sweat, and leather. Somewhere beneath it all were the sweet notes of whiskey, gin, and, to a lesser extent, bourbon, seeped into every table and floorboard. She inhaled the familiar smell and locked eyes with the Russell Brothers, framed above the landing as patron saints. John, or was it James, dusted his signature wearing a long white dress while James, or John, grasped a broom with a face full of gossip. The two chambermaids had performed while Darling was a child, and, in her mind, continued to judge the crowd every night.

Won't you strut Miss Milly
Get busy!

Darling heard Gene's voice, cracked by a decade on the vaudeville circuit, pierce through the sea of overlapping conversations. She turned to see him sitting at the piano, gesturing to Milly and Mabel as they stumbled to the center of the room. The mica shade lamps gave a copper tint to their blond hair, falling in tight curls on skin kept a light shade of porcelain by hats and parasols in their youth. They were dressed in identical Collet Soeurs dresses, trimmed with gilt lace embroidery that crept up to honey colored velvet. Darling remembered that the men watching cared only for the deep V-shaped decollete.

I wanna see you walk;
Oh, the folks all see the way you syncopate

Linking arms, the sisters were trying to cakewalk around the piano, but their failed attempts to step sideways in unison turned into another dance entirely. Darling was sure they could call it the Saxby step, name a cocktail after it, and soon every girl in the city would want both at the same time.

Hear the whole town talk!

She walked to the bar, if that's what you could call five antique chests pushed together to make a long table. They were nothing compared to the marble bars uptown but excellent for hiding the bottles and runaways. At the moment, they were all empty and the suitcase was left on top, reminding her to take it upstairs and put it in Mrs. O'Connell's dresser. Lesley stood leaning against one of the chests and scanned the crowd.

“He's over there.” She pointed to the far end of the room, where, barely visible through the thick haze of smoke, Clive's feet were propped up on the table.

When you move so preety
It's a pity
The other girlies frown

She noticed Chubby inching towards her. He made no effort to reach for his handkerchief anymore.

“Pardon me, Miss, but when do you suppose we should start our set?”

“The sisters won't last much longer. You'll have our attention soon enough.”

But the men you meet
Like the way you shake your feet

Only two men were not witness to Mabel and Milly's efforts to dance with each other. Clive sat upright, leaning in towards Lesley who was talking deliberately and moving his navy blue fedora with the music.

Oh, you knock'em dizzy
Strut Miss Milly!

At the end of Gene's last flourish on the piano, Darling lifted Mabel out of Pretty Sid's lap and pulled a reluctant Milly away from the keys before she could strike a chord.

“Gene, will you take the girls outside for some fresh air?”

When his coattails, flanked by two sets of white satin shoes, disappeared up the stairs, Darling took her seat on top of the piano.

“If I find whoever put that many drinks in Miss Mabel and Milly, I'll thank you for it later. But now it's time for some new blood. Chubby Miller and the Arcadians. Consider their saxophone your cool drink of water for the night, ‘cause you sure aren't getting any from me.”

She looked down at Chubby.

“Mind if I stay up here?”

“Please.”

“Playing anything I would know?

“We're starting off with You're Busted.”

“I'm not sure I've heard of that one. You go ahead without me.”

Walter opened the saxophone case to a selection of handcuffs. Her eye caught a pair made of solid brass that looked like it predated the Civil War. She felt blood rushing to the back of her neck, moistening the ends of her wavy hair.

“You heard the man. Put your bottles and glasses where everyone can see them.”

Lesley walked to the bar, opened the suitcase, and took out three bottles in each hand. He set them carefully on either side of Darling and stepped back.

“Clive, how's your aim?”

“Decent.”

“Then these should be easy.”

Without a sign of hesitation for wasting quality whiskey, or concern for the proximity of Chubby's head, Clive took out a Colt 1911 from under the table and fired. Lesley threw his jacket on the piano to divert the liquid from reaching Darling's legs. She heard it slowly dripping on the keys and cringed for Gene's sake.

“Which one of you is Izzy Einstein?” Lesley was leaning over the piano, now covered with shattered glass.

“That's me,” Chubby said. “Moe Smith is my one-time saxophonist. Now if you'll —”

“Are there any journalists in this room?”

“Lois Hunt.” Sleek black hair hugged her ears and cut across her forehead in a straight fringe. She looked at Lesley with steely detachment while her dark lips curled slightly.

“What paper do you work for, honey?”

“Town Tattle if I give them the right story tomorrow.”

“You will write about Izzy and Moe's attempt at entering O'Connell's and confiscating Canadian Club Whiskey dressed as musicians. They got close to the arrest but failed to secure any evidence. Clive Delaney — fresh from prison — shot every last bottle. “Comeback Kid” has a nice ring to it but I'll leave the details up to your imagination.”

“Don't bother,” Izzy got up and grabbed a pair of handcuffs. “We won't-”

“Mr. Einstein, Clive is a good shot, as he just demonstrated, but moving targets are a whole different game. I suggest you take a seat and watch the show. We're just helping you do your job. A word of advice. Next time, get your evidence before you're busted.”

“You tell me which one, Darling,” Clive said.

“Will I be mentioned in this article of yours?” she asked Lois.

“Depends how interesting you are.”

Her remark stung and brought back the voice of her theater teacher Mrs. Riggs, telling her to sell it or go home. To this day the memory sent a shot of fear through her.

“All right. The deuce spot goes to Mr. Raymond Wilson and one-two-three ladies desperate for his letters to be as sleazy as his still unpublished verses. Just last week a girl who sat where you are now stuck her head in an oven because he insulted her poetry.”

Wilson had no time to respond before fragments of glass scattered over his table and the girls drew back with gasps.

“The flash act goes to the table of three boys and two girls with full glasses and two bottles that they won't miss too much. Don't let their disheveled hair and sloppy dress deceive you. This little incident will scare them off to spend the rest of their summer in Provincetown or Martha's Vineyard or wherever they belong.

“Now for the headliner. Or two. First, we need to sober up those on their way to success. Let's take Pretty Sid and Little Francis and their table of three other boys who have all been perfecting the art of petty crimes since they could walk. It's time to step up and organize, fellas.

“Our second headliner should be Mr. Cornellius Grant, who, with every drink, loses another thread of hope that he will be the star he was at Harvard five years ago. Captain of the crew team with a faultless academic record and a pedigree to match, so why is he here?

“The haircut act, as always, is the one we can all do without. I don't know his name but the clean shaven man with the smug look on his face no doubt works on Wall Street. And that's the most interesting thing about him. Maybe lives in the neighborhood because of it's — what do the guidebooks say? — old-fashioned charm?”

“Not a single missed shot,” Lesley said. “Clive, you should be a cop with your record.” Laughter loosened the room and a few started to move towards the stairs.

“I think we're being unfair to our Don Quixote and Sancho Panza. They did provide some fine entertainment this evening and they deserve their share. Darling, do you know any places nearby that would accommodate these gentlemen?”

“There's Sal's Groceries on Houston, near the Academy Theater. The door's open and when you get to the back, you'll meet a heavily mustached man sleeping on a pile of newspapers. Wake him gently and ask if he would like to sell a pint to a deserving agent. He'll think you're kidding and give it to you right away.”

“Lois, follow them and you'll double your chances.”

The sound of glass crushing and tables groaning across the wet floor drowned Lesley's last words. Darling wondered how many of the witnesses would come back.

“These aren't government issued, are they?” Lesley was holding up a pair of handcuffs against the light as Izzy and Moe were about to close the saxophone case.

“We got them at a flea market, just in case.”

“You come prepared. I like it. I tell you what. How does this sound for one pair? You still have three left.” He held up a fifty dollar bill.

Izzy glanced to see if Lois was still there. She was gone, along with everyone except Lesley, Darling, and Clive, who hadn't moved since firing his last bullet.

“We'd better go,” Darling said. “Mrs. O'Connell's not going to ignore the sound of that many bullets. One or two broken bottles sends her into a fit. You don't want to be here when she finds her basement swimming in glass.”

Moe grabbed the bill and closed the case with the delicacy of a policeman. Clive got up and handed the pistol to Lesley. Darling followed the company of four up the stairs, trying to avoid looking back at the damage. She would come back in the morning.

With one last glance at the Russell brothers, she took the keys out of her pocket and locked the door. Cool, smooth metal touched the back of her arm and she lingered for a moment before turning around. She felt a crushing pressure on her wrists.

“There's no evidence left. You can't arrest me after —.”

Lesley held two sets of keys and her hands were empty. Clive's grip right above her elbow was too firm to protest.

“You said you wanted to take the Hudson for a drive. It's a little tight but I'm sure you can manage.”

She saw a blonde head resting on the side door.

“You think you can force me into your car like a cheap chorus girl.”

“Are you referring to your spectacularly drunk blondes?”

“Where's Gene?”

“He left at the first gunshot,” Tommy said from inside the car. “Get in the car, Darling. I can't stand this many people breathing down my neck.”

“I stay here or I'll tell the papers you take girls at will. I'll tell Lois.”

“It wouldn't be the first time,” Lesley said. He took hold of her arm while Clive held on to the other. As they forced her near the car, she dug one of her heels into the side, adding to its collection of scars.