

# Dance Halls Flooded By Drink, Dope

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## DANCE HALLS FLOODED BY DRINK, DOPE

### Girls Are Told Of Kick In “Muggles”

**This is the second of a series of articles on the “free” dance halls of New Orleans, written by a girl reporter for *The Item* who worked in them.**

Drink, dope and men of all ages and occupations—these are to be found night after night at the Arcadia dance hall, corner of Burgundy and Canal streets, one of the three “free” dance halls in which the writer worked for a week. There was drink in abundance, that second night when we came to take the job of dancing given us by the manager the night before—although nothing but soft drinks are sold on the premises. And drunken men, as long as they can toddle around the dance floor, are welcomed both by the management and the girls because the drunker they are, the more they suffer under the delusion that they are reincarnations of Vernon Castle.

Dope came afterward, in the form of “Mary Warner” cigarets, which two young men who pressed their services on us as escorts home, offered us, assuring us that “they sure would give us a lift—much better than whiskey because you woke up in the morning without a head.”

The girls who dance are glad to accept liquor from their acquaintances of the dance floor, needing a stimulant after two or three hours of continual dancing, most often with clumsy partners or drunken ones, who have to be held up to keep them from falling to the floor. Dancing for pleasure and dancing for a living are two different things.

As to whether the girls accept offers of “Mary Warner” cigarets, we don’t know. We only know from our inquiries that all the girls had heard of them, all had been offered them, and all knew some girls who smoked them.

“But Cheesus, I’m scared to death of them—they make you crazy,” seemed to be the sentiment of most of them. “And you get a habit from them. Give me some good old whisky any day. That has a real kick in it.”

### Drunken Nights Recalled

“Say kid, do you remember the night we were all so drunk that we couldn’t dance, and gosh, wasn’t Mrs. S. mad?”

“And do you remember the night that Sadie got so stewed she fell on the floor, and cut her face all up. Gee, I never laughed so much in my life.”

Not that the girls openly accept bottles from the men and tilt them on the dance floor. After all, these are times of prohibition, and there is a policeman on the floor whose uniform causes even the most riotous to moderate his conduct. But hip pockets bulge, and the men’s room in the rear is next to the girls’ dressing room, and bottles can be passed from the window of one into the other. The stuff is more palatable when poured into a bottle of limeade or such-like drink. Then, disguised by the innocent pop bottle, the girls can leave their drink on the shelf, and come in between dances every now and then and sip at it. “You need something to keep you going,” they say.

It is only the habitués who know that the policeman is after all a figurehead. Most of the customers are transients, salesmen, sailors and boys from the army and navy, high school boys out seeing life. But there is a goodly number of low-browed young men, dressed in the most dapper styles who hang about the dance hall every night as they would about a pool room. Some of these are the “steadies” of some of the girls, although one steady may have belonged to Marie last week, and Sadie the week before. Some of the girls have “husbands” who profess themselves to be very jealous of their wives. The fellows who look as though they made an occupation of “steading” the girls, do little dancing, but lean over the railing, talk to the musicians, and escort their girls home. And woe unto the girl who dances, however innocently, with the steady of one of the others. Forthwith there will be a battle royal in the dressing room, and then the stream of filth and obscenity can be heard on the streets below. The girls of sixteen outdo the “girls” of thirty-five. The younger they look, the more hard-boiled they seem.

It was one of these steadies who gave us an inkling of the policeman’s position in the dance hall. The steady had proved himself objectionable New Year’s night, refusing to go home. The policeman shouted at him and he shouted back. They swore at each other, quite oblivious of their listeners.

“You’re nothing but a louse,” yelled the steady. “And what’s more you’re a d—d liar.”

At this we expected to see him turned out, but the policeman retreated, vanquished by the superior shouting power of the other.

### **Jerry, New On the Job**

Jerry, which seems to be the policeman’s name, has been at the Arcadia only for the last six weeks. Before that he was required only on Saturday nights. “Oh, yes, I have lots to do,” he replied to our inquiries. “They keep me pretty busy around here.” And although he said nothing farther, he chuckled as though in reminiscence of some strenuous nights.

We were welcomed, that second night, with glances of hostility, by some of the girls, and with friendly overtures by the more assured and successful ones. However popular we might prove, the latter have a steady clientele, who come night after night and send their friends when they are out of town. For it goes without saying that only traveling men or soldiers and sailors spend their money in these places. The steady ones who hang over the railing know that you spend more in one of these dance halls than you can at a cabaret or a dance hall where they can bring a girl and where admission is charged. You can spend a dollar

in exactly ten minutes, and if you are too drunk to realize that a hundred dances means a hundred times ten cents, you will wake up the next morning wondering where your money has all gone.

If the men complain of the shortness of the dances, the girls are instructed to say that they were late in starting to dance—they didn't get on the floor when the music started, and that's why the dance seemed so short.

If we had been dancing for our living we would have considered it our good fortune that second night, to have been picked on by an especially drunken sailor who was intent on learning to dance. With him was a tall, serious faced sailor lad, who explained to all who would listen, that he did not believe in dancing himself, but that he was going to see to it that his friend learned how. Time after time he went to the cashier's desk and bought a dollar's worth of tickets which he gave to his friend, one at a time. On the ticket is written the words, "Good for one lesson," and the girl tears off half which she keeps herself, and gives the other half to the keeper at the gate. The tickets which she collects, she keeps in the palm of her hand, held there by some elastic bands. Most of the men decline to pay for checking their hats, and the girl holds this for them while they dance. Sometimes, if she has been having nips from a bottle in the dressing room, she wears the hat herself.

### **Wild Scramble for Partners**

When the dance is over, unless she thinks she can get another dance from her partner, each girl makes a mad dash towards the cashier's desk, and stands there, ready to be taken for the next. The bolder ones elbow their way to the front, shout at the lookers-on, taunt the men into dancing, grab hold of the more timid ones before they have a chance to express their choice of girls. If they don't get that dance, they stand at the gate swaying their shoulders and hips suggestively, looking with meaning eyes at the men around. Or if they have been standing around too long, they dance with each other exhibiting their various steps and movements, all the while with their eyes on the long line of men watching them.

The railing extends all the length of the dance floor, and from ten thirty to twelve, the crowd of onlookers increases until the men are standing, crowded three and four deep, peering over each other's shoulders, elbowing to get a point of vantage. On good nights there are probably three hundred or so men in the hall, and you would think that thirty girls would not find it hard to make a living. Only the girls themselves know what a scramble it is.