

Danceland Girls Make Only 4 Cents But Manager Explains That It “Isn’t a Rough Joint”

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Scene: The Danceland, corner of Canal and Burgundy, and just around the corner from the Arcadia.

Time: The third night of our employment in the free dance halls of New Orleans.

Dramatis Personae: Mr. Berg, manager of the Danceland, five members of a rather poor jazz band, twenty-five girls from the ages of sixteen to forty, three hundred or so men of all description, and us, reporters from The Item.

Mr. Berg: “So you girls have been dancing over at the Arcadia. Well you can come on up here and dance if you want to. As for me, I wouldn’t advise any girl to dance in a place like the Arcadia or the Roseland. They’re rough joints. Lots of our girls are living at home with their families. Why, you wouldn’t believe it, but sometimes their mothers come up here and watch ‘em dance. Here, I only pay four cents a dance, I know, but a girl is safe in working here. Yes, give me your names, and hang your coats here, and there is the dressing room.”

The scene changes to the dressing room. It is a small room with two small mirrors, two tables loaded with cosmetics. On one side of the room is a pile of shoes, worn out and stubbed as to toe and heel. Before the mirrors are three or four “nice” girls, painting and powdering and smoking cigarettes.

One, with a slick, straight hair cut and buck teeth. “How do you like my hair cut, kid?”

Another, little and plump and full of laughter and also obscenity: “Say you _____, if you got out on the floor and _____ you’d make some money instead of standing in here and talking like a _____. You poor _____, what the _____ do you think you’re doing up here any way, _____.” Etc.

Another with a business-like face and a straight line for lips. She is dressed in a simple, little-girl dress of old rose. She is flat chested and round shouldered and from the rear looks like fifteen, from the front like forty. When she smiles, her face is contorted but not with mirth. Says she, “Look at the dollar tip I just got. Gee, that was a swell guy. He’s going to take me out afterward.”

Another, glaring after the last one as she left the dressing room to continue earning an honest living: “Would you look at that _____. Sure she gets a dollar tip. If you

_____ they'll give you a quarter, and if you _____," etc., increasing the amount by twenty-five cents with every vile remark.

Outside the dance hall is dimly lit and seems full of smoke as another girl opens the door of the well-lit dressing room and bursts in giggling shrilly. "Say, Gawd help me, every time they play "A Kiss in the Dark" that sailor gets me off in the corner and kisses the life outa me. He's a cave man and gosh I'm stuck on 'im."

There is more talk of steadies, and fellahs and methods of love making, and emphasis is added by a plentiful use of profanity and obscenity, all in a friendly spirit. We wondered what they had left to say to each other when they started to get mad, as we had seen two girls do over in the Arcadia.

Business was not so good in the dance hall that night. The hall was crowded, jammed in fact, as usual, but the men were "pikers" and stood around and watched and talked to the girls instead of dancing. Always there were ten or twelve girls standing around a pole in the middle of the floor, waiting for partners. The only bench in the room was next to the band, but when you got tired of standing, it was better to have the blare in your ears and be able to rest than to stand in the midst of the smoke and chatter.

The piano player is a chinless youth of tender years whose air of sophistication sits on him heavily. His thin hair is parted in the middle and fits straight and tight to his head like a mannikin's. He thumps heavily with both hands and feet, and occasionally stands up, with an air of boredom and plays while standing. The saxophone player almost reclines in his chair with his feet on the chair of the player next to him. He is a tall dark man, and when he takes his lips from his instrument, you notice that he has no teeth and that his mouth falls in like an old woman's. The other saxophone player is pop-eyed and looks as though with every spurt of melody, he were going to burst. His face is long and mournful and a feeling of the grotesque creeps over you as you watch him. The drummer has a million little tricks by which he charms the girls, who watch him when they are not dancing, and giggle at him and try to catch his eye. But he is very insouciant and disregards them as he does the crowd of male admirers who hang over the railing of the coop which confines the band. With an air of great indifference, even of melancholy, he throws his drumsticks in the air, catches them lightly, sways h[i]ther and yo[n], lets his head fall forward and then catches it with a jerk. His shoulders are so broad and his face so impassive, that the diminutive figure of the banjo player by his side, has the appearance of a vivacious little gnome.

And every now and then some would-be dancer, stunted and cheaply dapper strides up with a ticket in his hand, which you grab before someone else gets it, get a strangle hold around his neck and with an assumption of pep and abandon which you do not feel, you dance. A hundred dances a night, if your heart is in your work and you want to make a living; 700 dances a week, 2,800 dances a month, 43,600 dances a year! Watta life, to quote the poor dancing girls.

(Continued Tomorrow)