

Memoirs of a Beer Drinker

Richard Centing

1968

Acey-Acey is a game that used to be played at Lou Walker's Bar on Woodward. It is easy to learn and became quite popular a few years ago.

These are the rules: a number of people, at least three to four, but preferably five to six or more, gather around a bar table with a pack of cards; one is chosen dealer, and he deals one card at a time face-up to each player. Now the fun begins.

The first person to receive an Ace must name a drink, any drink for which the bar has the ingredients. An experienced bartender will start mixing this drink as soon as it is named, without waiting for the end of the game. The second person to receive an Ace must pay for the drink previously named. Finally, the third person to receive an Ace must drink the drink (before he receives another) named by the first person and paid-for by the second.

It is an interesting study in psychology to notice how different people react to either naming, drinking or paying for drinks. When everyone is smashed, the most diabolical name and wickedest drink to kill off his opponent. A simple martini is very effective, although some like the more colorful Singapore Sling. The nastiest name expensive drinks when everyone is going broke. It is all done with camaraderies and laughter, until someone chickens -out and breaks up the game. Such a coward is treated with tremendous scorn.

And so the game proceeds. Like war.

As a game of chance, it is the serious drinker's answer to Russian Roulette. Years ago, I told Vi Knabb that consistent bar going was a form of slow suicide, and certainly heavy drinkers are self-destructive, but now I wonder if the drinker by his involvement in a kind of group therapy in the bar situation, is not seeking a cure to his sickness, his loneliness, his absence of direction.

It was at Verne's the last night it was open, April 18, at its old location at Woodward and Forest. That night the drunken crowd, sentimental as most Americans, tore down the red plastic-covered wooden panels and ripped out the plumbing for souvenirs; they took home window lamps, the Men and Women signs off the john, and all the remaining matches with the old address.

One of the bartenders said that it was the "end of an era." Now, some of these people may have been only collectors in search of Camp, but I think that many people there felt they had lost a home in some unexpected disaster, and were salvaging the family jewels.

Another Verne's will rise. Some of the defectors from Lou Walker's may return home, content to put up with the service at Lou's, having little alternative. The important thing is that these people are losing a sense of community, a subculture with its own customs. They will have to adapt and migrate like all refugees. Their country, their bar, is dead.

According to a recent special on NBC, "The American Alcoholic," we have six million hard-core alcoholics in America. SIX MILLION. The program focused mostly on the curing of alcoholics in state hospitals. It was admitted that next to nothing was known about the causes of alcoholism. A pamphlet put out by the U.S. Government, "Alcohol and Alcoholism" (1967), estimates the adult drinking population as eighty million. America is a nation afloat on a sea of alcohol.

The social center (except for the drug culture) is the lounge, the bar, the discotheque. Bourbon has been given official sanction by LBJ. Prohibition has come and gone, a dismal failure, and the old temperance spirit has vanished.

Despite the known destructiveness of alcohol, drinking is on the increase. Alcohol has been proven a depressant, but it has also been proven to act negatively upon the regulatory structure of the brain, the reticular formation, the so-called master switchboard or activating system of the brain. The physiological effect is obvious, but what of the effect on our spirit, our very soul. As the philosophic bar napkin says, "The marriage of Scotch and water is the beginning of many a divorce."

On January 1, 1967, I made a resolution to never drink alcoholic beverages again. On St. Patrick's Day of that year I broke my vow, returning to Lou Walker's to be intoxicated again with Irish-American nostalgia and beer. As it stands now, I am drinking less and less, and coming to some conclusions about the whole problem of drinking in America.

One of these conclusions is that many drinkers are not at all thirsty for beer, but are literally starving to death. I have seen hundreds of drinkers eat substitute meals of hard-boiled eggs, peanuts and electrified sandwiches, and then, when the bar closed, seek out some all night restaurant, where they will consume rubbery pancakes, greasy sausages and oil-soaked potatoes.

These people are suffering from malnutrition, the American Malnutrition of bad food eaten too quickly.

Another conclusion: many people assume the false analogy that creativity is associated with drunkenness because some creative men are famous drunks. Thoreau said, "I believe that water is the only drink for a wise man," and I agree with him. For every Dylan Thomas there is a Shelley, who said, "Drink no liquid but water restored to its original purity by distillation."

It would be impossible to calculate the damaging prestige given to drinking by such clowns as Dean Martin, who pretends for his audience to be a sot, whereas in reality, as he has stated in an interview, he hardly drinks at all. Real drunks, such as W.C. Fields, add romantic glamour to lifelong indulgence.

The philosophic drinker thinks, sardonically, that we are all dying and soon to die: he thinks we should go out boozing, laughing, as it were, in the face of death, red wine dribbling our chin. "I die, therefore I drink," is inscribed on his forehead, a defiant epitaph. I would rather we sobered up and looked at the world around us and within.

If it is sensual love we seek in the dim lounges, let us give up pretending and looking, and love in the light of day.

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