

Gay old New York

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GAY OLD NEW YORK

The green buses driving along Fifth Avenue, New York's most famous street for shopping and living, inform us that this is the «Wonder City». Off and on it happens that one of the magazines or newspapers runs a series of articles revealing to its readers the joys of living in New York, and sometimes also the sorrows — but that occasionally depends upon the way you look at it. Some years ago a leading paper attempted to acquaint its readers with that peculiar section of the city known as Greenwich Village and vying for fame with Montmartre, beyond the sea. Not quite successfully, though; it takes Paris to produce its Montmartre and New York its Greenwich Village.

Once upon a time the «Village» was outside the limits of that townlet which was to become much later the largest metropolis on the American continent; country estates were grouped around what we now call Washington Square, and later it was the residential section of the families of wealth and of the intelligentsia. Mark Twain once lived just around the corner and I think so did Theodore Dreiser, the American novelist. Today it is a bohemian quarter. The quaint old houses of yesteryear are vigorously defended by their owners, inhabitants and neighbors alike. However only recently a whole block of houses — probably not old enough or picturesque enough to warrant their preservation — had to give way to the law school of New York University, and other projects seem to be in the making. The streets are still narrow and crooked, in pleasant contrast to the unbending lanes of the upper city. There are also the little shops with objets d'art and sometimes with pseudo-art. But none of that causes too much concern. It is night life there which makes the reader turn pages and go beyond the headlines. Particularly where this section, the romantic and almost legendary «Village», appears in the news, it is better to read between the lines — and assuredly more pleasant.

I do not need to tell you that there are various places for entertainment, some good and some not so good. The question is: what are the things that make the Village famous — and of course as other people may feel, infamous. Yes, certain bars around here are gay and others cater to a clientele of the sapphist inclination. It may even be true, as reporters on the scene before me have proclaimed, that there exist private and semi-private establishments which are patronized by pleasure seekers of very many types. Into that we need not go. Sticking to our own group of both sexes, we must not expect to find any kind of eldorado. There just are not any eldorados for us in the city of New York, unless you wish to apply that term to a public bar, where one can stand, sip a drink and risk the chance of talking to someone who might later turn out to be a money proposition or, even worse, a detective. But of course I don't want you to get the impression that you cannot go into a bar here without getting into trouble. Actually we suffer here much less from blackmail and prostitution than from the police and the law — not to mention the indignation of women's clubs and other all too public-minded male and female moralists. So we have these bars to go to and be a little among ourselves.

In the gay entertainment field neither Greenwich Village nor any other part of this city offers anything as hilarious — or as some see it outrageous - as the night life here is generally pictured. Une hirondelle ne fait pas le printemps! A burlesque show here and there, perhaps featuring a female impersonator, may reap a harvest of headlines; but these happenings are usually followed by a withdrawal of the license and subsequently end ingloriously. Anyway, they rarely have or have had a dash of «esprit». Even if such entertainment could rise to a level to be appreciated by those of better tastes, it would still be shortlived unless offered in seclusion and secrecy.

One important aspect of social life in our days is dancing. Our compatriots of other inclinations are infinitely better off in that respect. For us there is no public place where we would be allowed the harmless pleasure of swinging our friends around to the rhythms of waltzes, tangos or rhumbas. I am sure that in the «gay» twenties there were such things; not so nowadays. (Again, we are not speaking of the private or semi-private affairs.) But once a year it happens that officialdom does look the other way, and it is then that some thousand people of our «blood-group» congregate in one of the largest ballrooms in town; costume prizes are awarded on this occasion and there is much dancing and fun — but this does not take place in Greenwich Village. So you see the Wonder City does have its wonders, as it has — for us at least — its misgivings.

The population of New York is estimated at some 8 million people. A conservative figure for the number of exclusively homoerotic men here is 150,000. I imagine that, taking into account the magnetism which a city as large and cosmopolitan as New York exerts upon people who cannot express themselves fully in a smaller community, one can safely say that these men are all above minor age. The question of how we live and what our chances are for a less deprived existence is rather begging.

New York can be considered a liberal center, yet this liberalism seems to have little effect on the judgment of competent circles when it comes to our questions. Even the free and progressive attitudes within our social life are interpreted adversely. Let me be more explicit: American society at large suffers from certain prejudices, principally racial, conditioned by the historical development of the land. In New York no legal sanction is accorded them. They remain, however, and are given more subtle expression in social life. The prevailing attitude among our group is probably the least prejudicial of any, save that among political groups who may have ulterior motives. Nonetheless in some of the more scandalous and sensational publications these very facts about us are exploited in order to make our existence even more unpalatable than it unfortunately already is. Contrariwise we must admit in all honesty that a great many of our friends are active in a large number of semi-public organizations created to bring closer together the various racial, ethnic and religious segments of our community. In a way we must take pride in that, and I even like to go further by stating that our inclination, with all that it implies for our personal life, predisposes us favorably for such an undertaking.

Let us turn to another aspect. I have mentioned that prostitution and blackmail are not our greatest worry here. Neither one is absent, howe-

ver. But much more unrest among us is caused by the arbitrary actions of our police department. No one will deny that the duty of that public agency is to prevent crime. Still, the question should be raised whether their approach to our problem is a wise one and whether it is properly handled. A great handicap to a change in their policy is the law under which, we realize, they must act. The law making vagrancy punishable places a weapon in the hands of a police officer which he may use indiscriminately, and the intimidation which frequently plays a part in arrests of our friends is a greatly aggravating factor.

Two main aspects of our life cause us to be extremely disquieted with regard to police action. The first concerns the social gatherings in bars known to be gay and the curtailments which leave us without any place where we might dance and enjoy ourselves more freely. Secondly there are the raids of «hangouts» in parks where we might meet someone with whom to talk, to share a night or (if fate has so decreed) a lifetime.

As for feature number one, many of the bars where we may be a little bit «entre nous» are occasionally raided and closed. The reasons for this are generally far-fetched. It seems, as someone wrote rather disparagingly about us and life in Greenwich Village, that «technically homos must not gather on licensed premises». That situation, if true, would naturally pose a number of questions. I do not believe that the law, bad as it is, places the disposition or inclination as such under a ban. Even if, under the equally ridiculous lewdness statutes, certain actions can be prosecuted, the fact of a person's homosexuality does not warrant police or legal action. Yet an unbearable situation is upheld by a gross misconception, and most organizations, otherwise so liberal, are unwilling to look into the constitutional issue involved in the matter. Perhaps at some time to come an enlightened handling can gradually be effected, if we ourselves begin to face the situation responsibly.

The problem of parks is more intricate. New York is not unique in that respect. Every larger city in the world has its parks, certain sections of which are frequented by men of our love direction. For us there is nothing inherently bad in that. We may discourage, and even to the utmost, the performance of sexual intercourse in public places. Such encounters lack the desirable intimacy, and the chances for a more abiding resonance are less. But above all one should respect the sensitivities of others who also enjoy these parks. We must adapt ourselves to the demands of the culture in which we live, and that means that public performances are just not in vogue, be they hetero — or homosexual. Nevertheless, we do lament the fact that even without any special outwardness of behaviour many friends fall prey to false arrest and, by conjecture, are subject to vilification and prosecution unwarranted by facts. If the legal concept of «intent» is allowed to be interpreted as arbitrarily as at present, we are indeed quite justified in feeling that our civil liberties are brought as low as would befit any dictatorial regime in the world. Here the police act not only on the basis of their own narrow-mindedness, but constant pressure is brought upon them by civic groups in those neighborhoods. Some of them are simply concerned with morality; other such groups are afraid of the danger to youngsters, and they suffer from the wholly unsubstantiated fear that homosexuals go out to seduce the immature. Unfortunately, most that has been written about us in recent

years fuels the fears of fathers, mothers and other persons concerned with the young. I believe that we could easily disperse their fears if only we were given permission to speak for ourselves. As it is, that has been left to others, who, kindly disposed toward us as they may be, are nonetheless often misled by their misreading of statistics and the like — not to mention those who make a livelihood from sensational journalism.

So much for the gloomy side. A picture of gay life in New York could not claim to be representative if it neglected the pleasant moments. You may ask, and quite rightly so: where are your enjoyments, your compensations? Well, it has always appeared to me that in some respects we here are still lucky. A certain solidarity exists. You can make acquaintances very easily and if, after a brief talk about the weather, the movies and the ballet or any other cultural enterprise, you exchange addresses with your partner, you can be reasonably sure that Johnny is Johnny and that the telephone number is the correct one. One gives such information much more readily here, I think, than on the other side of the Atlantic. The living situation in New York also has its good sides. The bachelor — most of us are bachelors, of course — does not generally live in furnished rooms with private families. More often our friends live in the various types of rooming houses or residential hotels, and many have their own one- or two-room apartment. A certain privacy is thus assured. We can receive visitors or be invited by the friend we have met. Invitations are suggested with no more ado than is absolutely necessary under the circumstances. The risk involved is, nonetheless, taken, and that fact impresses the newcomer generally as one of the great compensations we enjoy.

Magnus Hirschfeld spoke of the «recognition by look» as one predominant feature of gay life in the Anglo-Saxon world. He was right. One need not frequent the so-called «hangouts» in New York to verify this; along certain streets — and they are not the worst streets of the city — the chances are that one may catch a glance, return it and the problem is settled. Also, due to the high percentage of bisexuality — a great deal of which is caused by the lack of other outlets — the incidence of encounters is increased. From the point of view of variety one may consider that to be especially enchanting. It is not, however, if we adopt a wider outlook, considering among other things how much better off those heterosexuals would be emotionally if they could only find sexual gratification in accordance with their psychological constitution, and for our own sake we should not overlook what little promise these affairs have for our personal future.

It is regrettable that we do not yet have a publication of our own. The laws are very effective in that realm. It will also be very hard to find people willing to risk such an undertaking now. I imagine that a few private groups do get together to debate the problems facing us in our daily lives, and particularly when our inclination has been discovered. Again the present state of affairs makes it well nigh impossible for us to raise a voice of protest. Yet we are not quite blameless ourselves. The future will tell whether our friends will wake up to the facts. Nothing can absolve us of that obligation. The day will surely come when more among us perceive that the right to love in our fashion is an inalienable one and worth fighting for.

H. S., New York.