

MR. COPACABANA

An American History by Night



By Jim Proser

Jim Proser
8650 Gulana Avenue, # L 3165
Playa del Rey, CA 90293
310 641 8363
jimproser@comcast.net

Praise for MR. COPACABANA

“The book recounts a single place in American Entertainment and as The Palace was the premium variety house, the Copacabana was the premium variety and comedy house. It was the best. If you played there, you were the best.”

Bernie Brillstein, Brillstein-Grey Entertainment

“Monte Proser was a quiet and dynamic man whose life story will no doubt inspire your readers. Who else could have brought together celebrities, gangsters and the rich and famous in an atmosphere to create the greatest American nightclub?”

The Copa is a legacy unmatched by any other nightclub before or since – it has artfully brought to life the essence of his character and the world in which he dared to live the American dream.”

Harriet Wright, ex-Copa girl, secretary of Copa Girls Association.

“I knew Monte and spent a lot of time at the Copa. They were both one of a kind. To my mind, your book has all the elements – romance, glamour, gangsters and the best entertainers in the world . . . I was fascinated to read the details.”

Danny Welkes, personal manager of Milton Berle.

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INTRODUCTION

Overview

To many people the Copacabana is the most famous nightclub that ever existed. It remains a legend through continual references in popular songs, books and movies. As a testament to the public's enduring fascination, a new Copacabana has recently opened in New York City. Although people all over the world continue to be captivated by the idea of the stylish and sexy Copa, the original club and the world it sprang from have vanished. What was arguably the greatest nightclub the world has ever seen is only half the story. The colorful, Broadway life of the tough little Jew from northern England who created, built and ran the place in its heyday, is the other, possibly more interesting half.

Monte Proser was a kingmaker in show business who made himself into an icon of New York and Hollywood nightlife. Frank Sinatra called him "The Genius" because of

Monte's quick mind and spontaneous innovation. He also revived Sinatra's career with a two-week stint at the club when the singer couldn't get arrested – as they say.

Monte was the first major downtown club owner to feature black performers. He put Lena Horne, Sammy Davis Jr. and Nat King Cole on his stage but, ironically, couldn't bring them through the Copa's front door. His attempts to seat blacks in the club caused even more fights than usual and threatened his license to operate. This frustration and his unbridled confidence spurred him to even grander visions. Convinced that he could create a nightclub for a mass, mixed-race audience, he made Madison Square Garden into the world's biggest nightclub ever - complete with a 70 foot waterfall, 70 foot palm trees and three big bands playing in rotation to over 4,500 wild jitterbuggers every night. He called it "Monte Proser's Dance Carnival." His soaring vision was soon brought back to earth. Racism wasn't limited to the patrons and staff of the Copa. Repeated fights broke out at the Dance Carnival and the police had to be called in to maintain order. "The black kids were just better dancers. It made the white kids mad," was the way Monte saw the problem, never admitting that people can be just hateful. After 22 days of fistfights that threatened to escalate into full-scale race riots, Mayor LaGuardia issued orders to close the place. Monte lost a bundle and his social experiment was over, but his reputation as a master showman and innovator of the nightclub format was secured. He got "ink" by the barrel in newspaper columns across the country.

Beneath the good times and lofty visions, Monte was locked in a dangerous tug of war with the mafia for control of the Copa. Particularly dangerous and loathsome to Monte was the mob's brutish, profane representative at the club, Jules Podell. In his FBI file, the Feds called Monte, " ...a known associate and business partner of crime boss Frank

Costello.” Unlike his hired hand Podell, Costello was a soft spoken and considerate family man who was dubbed “Prime Minister” for his negotiation skills. Like the fictional character of Tony Soprano, Costello was deeply troubled by his choice of livelihood and suffered emotionally for it. Although Costello imposed himself as Monte’s partner, he and Monte maintained a cordial business relationship. Costello helped finance the Copa and installed Jules Podell as his watchdog to run “the back of the house” – the kitchen, the bars, the concessions. Monte ran the “front”- the show, the promotion, the look of the club, the head chef.

Although they were friendly co-operators of the Copa, Monte attempted to distance himself from the taint of the underworld in his subsequent ventures on Broadway and in nightclubs. The separation lasted eight years. After a string of financial losses, with a family of five young boys and wife to provide for, Monte accepted \$5,000 a week to be the Entertainment Director of the Tropicana Hotel in Las Vegas in which Costello had a large interest. The associations with Costello tarnished Monte’s reputation publicly and permanently. It eventually brought about his total financial destruction when the Internal Revenue Service hounded him to ruination late in life. Monte’s life was one of painful lessons in the ethics and costs of compromise. It was also a life graced with a deep, unbreakable love between Monte and his wife, Jane. It was a life with a storybook ending when, at his darkest moment, total strangers appeared who still believed in his ability to deliver magic. They built a country inn for him that he called “The Little Club” after his great friend Billy Reed’s New York nightspot. He reigned there until the end of his days.

Monte was compromised by his association with gangsters, but his compromise provided certain benefits including extraordinary physical security, even to world leaders.

In the Copa kitchen in 1947, Monte hosted a critical meeting between Golda Meir and David Ben Gurion. The two seminal leaders of Israel discussed the formation of their proposed country, then being debated across town at the United Nations, over dinners of pineapple chicken while Jimmy Durante and the Will Maston Trio, featuring Sammy Davis Jr., performed outside in the main room.

Monte's private life, like his career, was never a smooth road. His first marriage was to Julie Jenner, a chorus girl on Broadway. On their honeymoon night at Grossinger's resort, he relaxed at a poker game before joining his bride in the bridal suite. After a few hundred dollars and a few ounces of scotch had slipped through his fingers, he got up and checked into another room and fell asleep, forgetting he was now married. A few years after his divorce from Jenner, he married the radiantly beautiful, dancer and movie star, Jane Ball, a peaches and cream Irish Catholic. They created a dynasty of five sons. They lived through floods and droughts of money, moving between the fashionable Hampshire House on Central Park South, Malibu, Beverly Hills, Palm Springs, a bucolic country estate in Bucks County, Pennsylvania and, when the money ran out, Kingston, New York. At one low point, the family was disbanded and their five young sons dispersed to relatives in Kingston. When the money returned, they were all re-united at "The Farm" in Bucks County.

Surprisingly, the evergreen pop song "Copacabana" by Barry Manilow gets some of the story of the Copacabana nearly right. Like the song, the story of the great nightclub includes violence and obsession. It includes the love story between a dancer at the club and her lover, but that's where the song ends and the truth begins. The true story is about a unique moment in American history where all levels of society rubbed elbows in a crowded

room, where top talent thrived and passions flared. It is also the riveting tale of a man corrupted by his obsessions, compromised by his associations with the underworld, destroyed by his addictions and then miraculously redeemed by his gift for capturing the magic of entertainment.

MR. COPACABANA will be the only book to:

- tell the true, inside story of most enduring and legendary nightclub in history
- chronicle the untold life story of the most colorful and renowned entrepreneur of the nightclub era who was once called “Broadway’s Favorite Son.”

The book will be an important addition to the existing library of entertainment history by chronicling the evolution of American entertainment through the eyes of one of its earliest and most eclectic producers.

Specifications

The manuscript will be 80,000 to 100,000 words. It will have 7 parts divided into a total of 30 chapters. It will contain numerous photographs of the era such as:

The Copacabana and Monte’s other clubs.

Celebrities, guests and friends of Monte including Frank Sinatra, Nat King

Cole, Dean Martin, Jerry Lewis, Jackie Gleason and many others.

Infamous gangsters.

Personal family photographs.

Additionally, the book offers insights and stories about the Copa and Monte Proser from dozens of personal interviews with famous entertainers, ex-Copa girls, Copa staff and club patrons.

About the Author

Jim Proser is the son of Monte Proser.

From the age of ten, I lived and traveled extensively with my father absorbing the stories of his colorful life first-hand. I have photographed and recorded interviews with my father's earliest friends and business associates for over 25 years. With my four brothers and extended family, I have collected significant Copacabana and other show business memorabilia associated with his father's many ventures – photos of which will be included in the book.

There have been many mentions in celebrity biographies and in broadcasts in recent years about the Copacabana, Monte Proser's connection to it and to organized crime. It is my intention to present the true "behind the scenes" stories, some of which have been distorted and many of which are unknown. Popular movies like "GOODFELLAS" and the recent television production "THE NIGHTCLUB YEARS", have only touched upon the Copa's history and often inaccurately. This book will be the first to accurately chronicle the life of the club and the man behind it – one of America's first and foremost nightclub impresarios. The real stories, over the 30-year life of the club and the 70-year life of the man who created it and made it famous, are much more revealing and interesting. The true character of Monte Proser and the cultural impact of his career

including the Copacabana is the unique perspective on this icon of American culture.

Jim Proser's professional credits include:

CHICAGO HOPE – screenwriter, “The Heavens Can Wait”, episode. 20th Century Fox Television,

JEREMIAH – screenwriter, internet prequel episodes for the dramatic series for Showtime Networks,

TALK IT OVER - screenwriter/director, nine part dramatic video series concerning teenage depression for National Institutes for Mental Health and UCLA.

WORKSHOPS - screenwriter/director, documentary series concerning administration of the Law of the Sea for the United Nations' International Seabed Authority.

ALL MINE – screenwriter - feature film, finalist at Sundance Film Festival.

INVESTOR'S BUSINESS DAILY – contributing writer to “Leaders and Success” – profiles of prominent business leaders.

BUCKS COUNTY COURIER TIMES – feature photojournalist, Sunday supplement.

LAMBERTVILLE BEACON - reporter – local (New Jersey) news.

Markets for the Book

“Mr. Copacabana” is a must-read book for audiences who love pop culture, history and biography.

Two large and motivated core readerships exist for this book; the World War II generation who are nostalgic for their collective history and Baby Boomers who are now motivated to understand their parents' generation as it slips away. Boomers are now the most affluent social group and are largely responsible for the continuing success of print, film and television programs set during World War II and the nightclub era. A third, smaller but motivated group is young adults who identify with the romantic era of the 1940s and have been driving the enduring success of swing dance clubs across the country.

As further evidence of the markets for entertainment specifically about Monte's Proser's circle of friends, two recent television productions on the life of Frank Sinatra and one on Meyer Lansky enjoyed significant success. Prominent film producer Bernie Brillstein, a Copa patron and fan, and contributor to this book, is planning a movie on the lives of Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis. Martin and Lewis are also the subjects of a recent CBS prime time television movie. The Arts and Entertainment Network recently aired THE NIGHTCLUB YEARS, a documentary examining the rise and fall of the nightclub culture in America in which Monte Proser and the Copacabana were featured.

This book will also attract readers with an interest in crime and the Mafia in America. It is the only book to focus exclusively on the legendary cultural phenomenon of the Copacabana as the extraordinary meeting place of the highest and lowest elements of society at a unique time in history.

Competitive books

While Monte Proser is no longer a celebrity, enduring public recognition of the Copacabana including the club's recent re-opening in New York City, may place the book

in the celebrity biography category. Currently similar titles featuring Monte's associates and contemporaries include:

- Stork Club - America's Most Famous Nightspot and the Lost World of Café Society – The history of the famous nightclub and its controversial proprietor, Sherman Billingsley. Little, Brown and Co. 2000.
- 21 - Every Day Was New Year's Eve; Memoirs of a Saloon Keeper – Memoirs of the proprietor of the legendary eatery. Taylor Publishing Co., 1999.
- Rat Pack Confidential - Frank, Dean, Sammy, Peter, Joey and the Last Great Showbiz Party – All the dirt, none of the calories. Doubleday, 1999.

The above books are complementary and readers of these books will have an interest in the story of the Copacabana and the man behind it. There is no biography on the market specifically about the Copacabana or Monte Proser's life. Monte Proser has been mentioned in virtually every major entertainment celebrity biography concerning the 1940s and 1950s including the biographies of Irving Lazar, Eddie Fisher, Dean Martin, Frank Sinatra, Tony Bennett, Nat King Cole, Jackie Gleason, Jimmy Durante, Mel Torme and many more.

Promotion

In the early days of the Internet, Jim Proser demonstrated his ability at promotion. He created an international network of concierges as a business resource and successfully

promoted the idea to Fortune 500 companies such as General Motors and MBNA Bank garnering INC magazine's recognition as one of the "Hottest Businesses of 1999" and an award from Internet search firm, Lycos, as "Top 5% Website". As a filmmaker, the author also successfully promoted a speaking tour of his national award winning film, FASHION FARMS.

Proser is an experienced public speaker who is committed to developing and executing promotional opportunities. These opportunities include:

1. Using his contacts in the entertainment industry to generate opportunities with news/entertainment radio and television shows that may have an interest in a new view of the legend of the Copa.
2. The author has received assurances that upon publication of the book, opportunities will exist for an on-air promotion of it by Gary Stevens, a nationally syndicated columnist and local New York radio personality with an audience of 700,000 readers and listeners. Coincidentally, Mr. Stevens was at the opening night of the Copacabana on November 1, 1940 and supplies several of the anecdotes in the book. Mr. Stevens has been hired in recent years to promote similar books such as "THE STORK CLUB - America's Most Famous Nightspot and the Lost World of Café Society and WINCHELL - Gossip, Power and the Culture of Celebrity".
3. Joe Franklin, New York radio and television host, has expressed a commitment to promote the book to his audience of viewers.
4. The Friars Club, a key research source, has also indicated a willingness to promote the book to its membership that includes the most powerful producers in all media.

MR. COPACABANA

The Mind Behind the World's Hottest Nightclub

Outline of Chapters

Introduction

They once referred to my father as “Broadway’s Favorite Son”. He was one of those larger than life Broadway characters who gambled wildly, boozed heavily and started work as the sun went down. He was a kingmaker in show business whose name could open any door. He created and operated the most popular nightclub in history, the Copacabana. As the nightclub era faded into oblivion in the 1960’s, so did my father’s name.

In 2001, I was watching a television documentary about nightclubs where my father was referred to simply as, “a front man for the mob.” His name, which had once held such power, was mis-spelled and mis-pronounced. In an instant, my father’s glittering legacy was reduced to a shameful fraud. Was I wrong about everything I believed my father had done? I immediately picked up the trail of a personal journey I had started as young man, to discover and accurately portray my father’s life – his deeds and mis-deeds. This book is my final gift to my father, the saloonkeeper, to set the record straight on who he was and how he lived.

Part 1

THE DINNER SHOW

Chapter 1 – Cocktail Hour

1948, New York - Frank Sinatra is at a low point in his career, hanging around the bar in the Hotel 14 next door to the Copa. He's ashamed to show his face in the club. The following week mob kingpin, Frank Costello, a financial partner in the Copa, calls Monte Proser, the club's creator and proprietor, and asks him for a personal favor. Will Monte help out Sinatra with a booking at the club? Monte, always the soft touch to help out a struggling performer, considers it and agrees. The booking revives Sinatra's career. From that time on, Sinatra refers to Monte as "The Genius." We follow Monte through a typical day of audition and the dinner show at the Copa. Future super-agent, Irving Lazar, sells Monte a musical act. Monte gives him the nickname "Swiftly".

The appearance and functions of the club and staff are described within the social context of America just after World War II. Main characters in the club are introduced including; Jack Entratter, manager and former bouncer at the Stork Club, financial partner and mob kingpin Frank Costello, the violent and profane co-operator and mob representative Jules Podell, Monte's bitter rival for control of the club.

Monte seeks relief from his constant worry over mob encroachment in the Copa by relaxing in the manger's office before opening for the evening. As he contemplates his relationship to his gangster overlord, Frank Costello, he is struck by the similarities between Costello and the only other man to constrain his independence, his dictatorial father.

He recalls slipping his father's grasp for the first of many times and stepping off the boat from England onto the docks of Baltimore, Maryland on July 4, 1915. In Baltimore, the colorfulness and diversity of America infuses Monte's naturally fun-loving, entrepreneurial spirit. He is drawn to the nightlife. The personality that will make him the most successful nightclub impresario in history begins to form. Monte explores rowdy American culture – the mixture of southern, northern and immigrant influences alive at that time in Baltimore. Monte's father notes the coarse language and wild attitude Monte is adopting. He knows his son is staying out late and hanging around with "the wrong elements." He takes Monte out of public school and restricts his activities severely. Monte neglects the classic education of his father's home tutoring to read the pulp adventure stories on the newsstands. He devours dime novels and comic books about the wide open American West and fast living in the big cities. He develops a devotion to reading.

Chapter 2 – Bawdy Houses and Ragtime Music

In spite of his father's restrictions, Monte finds adventure and freedom as a messenger boy for the Western Union company. He wears out two pairs of roller skates dashing madly down the streets and back alleys of Baltimore. The job brings him into contact with all levels of society and engages his social skills. He talks to everybody and knows their business.

Girls begin to interest him and he simultaneously discovers his love for the new music called "rags". He also discovers his natural talent for promotion at the Catholic church fair where he spiels like a carnival barker about the healthful effects of birch beer as "...a tonic used by the great Indian chiefs Pontiac and Sitting Bull." After he is caught by a policeman listening to the new ragtime music at the kitchen door of a bawdy house, his father forbids him

to work at his beloved job as a messenger for Western Union. Monte begins a pattern of defiance against his father's strict supervision and authority in general. He is determined to be free and on his own as soon as possible. The family moves from Baltimore to Brooklyn, New York. Monte continues to fight openly with his overbearing father.

Part 2

THE JAZZ AGE

Chapter 3 – The Prince of Freeport

Monte and his sisters are restricted to the stuffy rooms of their apartment where they are privately tutored by the monotonous Miss Creel who reeks of cabbage and camphor. Monte runs away to Freeport, Long Island. With the absolute confidence and naivete of youth, he decides that the Mayor of Freeport should know that he has arrived and marches directly to the Mayor's office. While waiting to see the Mayor, he changes his name from Meyer Marcus Prosser to Monte Proser. It sounds more American like his favorite Western movie star, Monte Blue. He boldly introduces himself to the Mayor and informs the man of his suitability for any type of work that could use a well dressed and educated young man. When Mayor Disetel recovers from laughing out loud, he is so impressed with the boy that he invites him to stay as a guest in his own home. He thinks Monte will be a good influence on his shy son Gregory. Monte takes up residence with the Disetels and becomes assistant stage manager for vaudeville acts at the Lights Club theatre in Freeport. Mayor Disetel informs Charles Prosser of his son's situation. Charles travels with the girls to Freeport to confront Monte. Charles recognizes that Monte is mature enough to be on his own and gives his permission for Monte to

stay with the Mayor's family through the summer. Summer ends and Monte decides to hit the road to adventure in the American West.

Chapter 4 – Bums, Hoboes and Bindlestiffs

As a teenager in the 1920's, Monte leaves home in New York and rides the rails as a hobo in boxcars. Distinct from other hobos, he mails his tailored Brooks Brothers suit ahead to hotels in certain cities. He follows his suit and then sits in hotel lobbies dressed in his suit waiting to be discovered. When this naïve ploy fails, he finds employment as an itinerant working stiff (bindlestiff) doing odd jobs. He develops his capacities for mean physical labor, a ready quip and a common touch with his fellow hobos. These traits make the years as a hobo into a carefree adventure. He meets lifelong friend and early partner Carl Erbe in a boxcar. The two hobos, Carl and Monte, land jobs as entertainment directors for campers in Yellowstone Park. Carl returns to Baltimore, Monte joins Snapp Brothers Circus as a roustabout. Once again, his talent for promotion propels him to the position of circus barker where he engages Midwesterners with his oratory about the thrilling show awaiting them under the Big Top. He has his first sexual experience secretly with Madame Wondra, wife of his boss. The season ends and the travelling circus heads to winter quarters. Monte hops the nearest boxcar heading west.

Chapter 5 – The 500 Mile Death Race

At the age of 20, Monte lands in Chicago at the height of the lawlessness of Prohibition. He makes friends with Deany O'Brien's North Side Irish Gang and learns the trade of promotion with diamond merchant Sam Klein. Monte creates the "Meet Klein and

Wear Diamonds” campaign. He pulls off his first publicity stunt by promoting “The 500 Mile Death Race” between his boss Sam Klein in a car and the Union Pacific Railroad’s Super Chief train. When Deany O’Brien realizes Monte has arranged for Klein to win in a photo finish, he and his gang take bets all over Chicago as if it was a real race. Monte is feted by the gang as a brilliant young fixer. Sam Klein is killed in the race and the gang has to pay off on all the bets. They come looking for Monte but he skips town.

Chapter 6 – The Fight Game

Monte lays low in nearby Madison, Wisconsin where he finds and promotes a local fighter, Percy Palonen, whom he renames “Kid Jabs.” Monte is briefly in the fight promotion business until Palonen falls in love and quits. Monte discovers his vices, the two banes of his life - gambling and scotch whiskey. He rapidly loses most of his money and hits the road in his yellow Nash roadster headed west. When the Nash breaks down, he rides the rails again and gets a job washing dishes in Brown’s Hotel in Denver. To escape the routine of washing dishes and living in the backwater “cowtown” of Denver, he lands a job as “foreman” transporting a fractious, violent work gang to Los Angeles.

Part 3

BIRTH OF THE CLUBS

Chapter 7 – Hollywood Dreams

In 1920s Hollywood, Monte works as a movie extra and on a road crew where he joins the labor union International Workers of the World, the socialist “Wobblies.” This experience, combined with his years as an itinerant manual laborer, crystallizes his social

and political character as a working man, a Democrat, and a liberal. Monte is living in a crummy LA hotel when a letter arrives from his old hobo buddy, Carl Erbe. Carl invites Monte to join him in a new movie company back East. He hops the first boxcar and rides the rails back to New York, where he and Carl go into the movie business. They produce their own two-reelers in small towns. They shoot the same story – boy meets girl, girl gets into trouble, boy saves girl - in each town, using the sons and daughters of the most prominent local townspeople. The films play in the local theatres for weeks. Monte is the advance man for the operation. He is on the road to small towns within a hundred miles of New York City but it's not like travelling among the fraternity of hobos. It's a lonely existence. He gets to know the townspeople only briefly but finds the personal connection he needs to satisfy his big-hearted nature in the roadhouses, gin joints and speakeasies they frequent. He develops his social philosophy that any tavern bar is "...the great equalizer."

Chapter 8 – A Broadway Flak

The two partners find they are spending all their time in small towns outside of New York away from the action. Realizing they can create hoopla on the flimsiest of pretences and talk almost anyone into anything, they form Erbe and Proser, Press Agents with offices on Broadway in New York City. Driven by his compulsion for fun and freedom, Monte is drawn to the wild exuberance in the Prohibition speakeasies of the late 1920s including those of famed Texas Guinan and Toots Shor. Meanwhile back at the office, Carl buckles down to the adult responsibilities of running a business and develops publicity accounts among normal daytime businesses like dentists and lawyers.

Monte begins his association with gangsters by putting an unflattering article about gangster Dutch Schultz, a partner in Texas Guinan's club, into the newspapers. In response to this unwelcome publicity, Schultz puts out a contract on him. Monte goes into hiding for six months, but doesn't go far. He hides out at other nightclubs where doormen and waiters watch the front door for him. After six months, he is told Schultz has left town. He opens his first New York club – Monte's Clam House. Unfortunately, his information was wrong. Schultz has not left town and in fact he's on his way over to the club. As Monte is trying to squeeze through a tiny kitchen window, the gangster arrives at the bar. He slaps down a \$500 donation to the club in a gesture of admiration for Monte's chutzpah. Monte is pulled from the window and makes up with the Dutchman.

Monte is finally in business for himself. The Depression descends increasing competition among nightspots for customers who can afford to go out at night. He once again relies on his talent for promotion to keep columnists like Earl Wilson, Mark Hellinger, Joey Adams, Jack O'Brian and Walter Winchell supplied with colorful tidbits. In the process, of course, he promotes himself and his ventures.

Chapter 9 – Return to Babylon

In 1933, when Prohibition is repealed and the speakeasies close down, Monte becomes a press agent for Max Roach and United Artists. He becomes the favorite of producer Walter Wanger who is working at the Astoria Studios in Queens, New York. He is assigned to follow W.C. Fields and make sure that the comedian doesn't drink – a stipulation of Fields' contract. Monte catches Fields in a bar – Fields tells him, "Kid, I'm not drinking. This is sherry. Sherry's for faggots."

While working for Wanger, Monte meets his life-long partner and benefactor Milton Blackstone. Together they convince Jenny Grossinger to allow them to develop her 5-room bed and breakfast home into the world class Grossinger's Hotel and Resort in the Catskill Mountains.

Monte, now 30 years old, marries dancer Julie Jenner who is performing on Broadway. They honeymoon at Grossinger's, where suddenly and definitively, the underlying compulsion of Monte's life, to avoid responsibility, surfaces with a vengeance. After they check in, Monte sends Julie on to the bridal suite while he decides to relax with a few hands of poker in the game room. Near midnight, he hasn't come up to the suite and his new bride is frantic. She summons hotel security to search the grounds. They call the police. A night clerk at the front desk discovers Monte has checked into another room. They discover him there drunk and fast asleep. He had forgotten that he was just married.

Chapter 10 – The Country Squire

Monte is introduced to country life in nearby Bucks County, Pennsylvania by his good friend and radio producer, Walter Bachelor. He tells Julie he is ready to start a family in the country but she wants her career, not a family, and understandably has doubts about Monte's readiness for family life. Monte's boss, Walter Wanger, is raiding Broadway for talent and stories for his movies and Monte feels he is ready to produce theatrical shows that he hopes will be bought as material for the movies. He and Bachelor lease a theatre in Connecticut to produce shows off Broadway. To relax on weekends, Monte and the stars of Broadway frequent Bachelor's Pennsylvania estate that they call simply "The Farm". Arthur Godfrey broadcasts his popular radio show live on location from the cabana house

overlooking the farm's pool. Lew Walters, owner of the Latin Quarter in New York, brings his young daughter, Barbara, to swim in the pool.

Julie finally decides in favor of her career, leaves Monte and files for divorce. Monte is crushed by Julie's abandonment. He cashes in his partnership in the Connecticut theatre with Bachelor and moves as far from New York as possible.

Chapter 11 – Carrying the Torch

He opens his second nightclub, La Conga, in Hollywood in 1937, which quickly becomes a favorite industry hangout with private nights for movie stars who don't want to be fawned over by the public. It is his first experiment with the tropical motif that would become his trademark in all his clubs. Still heartbroken over Jenner, Monte encounters composer Lew Brown at the bar of the Clover Club – a favorite of gamblers like Monte because of the private casino in the back room. Monte has tears in his eyes as leans up to the bar and orders. He responds to Brown's friendly inquiry, "Monte, what's the matter?" with "Hey, Lew. I saw her last night and got that old feeling." Brown is struck by the emotion and the line. That week Brown composes the song, "That Old Feeling" which becomes a major hit and classic of lost love.

Monte opens the Top Deck on Catalina Island and experiences his first failure because he didn't recognize that most tourists leave Catalina in the afternoon to return to Los Angeles. Julie Jenner arrives in Hollywood to try to break into the movies. Monte closes La Conga and leaves for New York.

Monte takes a job promoting the French Casino nightclub in New York. He starts living a Runyonesque Broadway life in earnest – staying up all night drinking and

gambling. He is a frequent guest at Mayor Jimmy Walker's floating crap game and frequent patron of Aqueduct Racetrack as well as Billy Rose's "Little Club", Billy Reed's "Diamond Horseshoe", Barney Josephson's "Café Society" and several of the hundreds of legitimate nightclubs now operating in New York.

Part 4

THE MIDNIGHT SHOW

Chapter 12 – Monte Proser's Copacabana Presents...

Monte develops a successful string of Beachcomber nightclubs in New York, Miami and Chicago. His friend and press agent, Jack Diamond, vacations in Rio and brings back photos of the beach bars on Copacabana beach. The Copacabana is born in Monte's imagination.

Typically, Monte's exuberance exceeds his practicality. He leases the basement of the Hotel 14 on 60th Street just east of Fifth Avenue – a risky location for a rowdy nightclub and the jinxed previous site of a failed nightclub by recording icon Rudy Vallee. He quickly runs through his own money and the word is out on the street that he is in financial trouble. Dapper, gentlemanly Frank Costello, crime boss of New York, walks through the front door of the club under construction, offers his hand to Monte and says, "Say hello to your new partner." Monte sits down with Costello to review his options and to avoid partnership as he had successfully done at his Beachcomber clubs. It becomes clear that Costello isn't offering an invitation. Monte plays the cards he is dealt and negotiates a split of money and responsibilities. He shakes Costello's hand and his deal with the devil is sealed. Later that week, Jules Podell, ex-hoodlum and proprietor of the Kit Kat Club, a

late night strip joint on Broadway, is recruited by Costello to oversee his investment in the Copa.

On November 1, 1940, the Copacabana opens to wild enthusiasm. It quickly becomes the undisputed top nightclub in the world. Headliners include Jimmy Durante, Frank Sinatra, Martin and Lewis, Eartha Kitt, Tony Bennett, Milton Berle, Eddie Fisher, Nat King Cole and Lena Horne. Monte frequently rescues performers like Durante and Sinatra from obscurity. Rivers of cash flow into the club. Podell asserts his reign of terror among the kitchen and serving staff. He pushes to take over Monte's end of the business as well. A lifelong feud and power struggle is touched off between the two co-operators.

Chapter 13 – Broadway's Favorite Son

A year into the Copa's successful dynasty, while still operating the successful Beachcomber nightclubs, Monte leases Madison Square Garden and opens the largest nightclub in the world, "Monte Proser's Dance Carnival". Continuing in his lucky tropical motif, he decorates the place with 70-foot palm trees and a 70-foot waterfall. The place packs in 31,500 crazed jitterbuggers its first weekend with a dance floor that accommodates 5,000. Three swing bands including Benny Goodman, Charlie Barnet and Larry Clinton play in rotation. Fights between whites and blacks break out regularly during its 22-day run. Mayor LaGuardia closes it, fearing a race riot. Monte is wiped out financially and is forced to sell his successful Beachcomber nightclubs to pay his losses. He is now financially dependent on the Copa and locked into his power struggle with manager Podell. His association with Costello scares off other investors. Broadway producers, the Schubert brothers, decline to get involved with him on theatrical projects. He is now also dependent

on gangster Costello for investment. Monte develops entertainment for Costello's Piping Rock casino and racetrack in Saratoga Springs, New York.

In 1942, Monte courts Copa showgirl Jane Ball. Jane is a quietly elegant Irish beauty from a large family. She is a hardworking dancer working eight shows a week for the legendary Broadway director George Abbott in Panama Hattie on Broadway, and then joining the Copa line for the midnight and 2 AM shows. Like dozens discovered at the Copa, Jane soon signs a contract with 20th Century Fox as an actress. Coincidentally, she signs her contract on the same day as another new talent, Norma Jean Baker – soon to become Marilyn Monroe. Jane is cast in KEYS TO THE KINGDOM with Gregory Peck and FOREVER AMBER with George Sanders.

Costello puts up money for the Mocambo in Hollywood with gangster Johnny Roselli. It is another big success. Monte is indicted for war tax evasion by LaGuardia in New York and is acquitted.

Chapter 14 – Home at Last

Jane is commuting regularly from Hollywood to be with Monte. Induced by overwork and erratic schedules, Monte and Jane seek relief and rejuvenation from the soon to be infamous Dr. Feelgood, Max Jacobsen. Jacobsen injects them with mixtures of amphetamines and vitamins. Jane begins taking prescription barbiturates to calm herself and counteract the effects of amphetamines which prevent her from sleeping.

After completing WINGED VICTORY for George Cukor, Jane quits the movie business to marry Monte. They are married in idyllic New Hope, Pennsylvania and honeymoon at Monte's country estate "The Farm" which he gives to Jane as her wedding

present. In February 1945 their first son, Charles Morgan is born. They call him Chip. Inspired by the birth, song team Hilliard and Howard writes the popular song, “My Little Guy.”

In 1947, with the Copa still in high gear, Monte produces HIGH BUTTON SHOES (music by Jule Styne, lyrics by Sammy Cahn) on Broadway. He also hosts a high level, top security dinner for Golda Meir and David Ben Gurion to discuss the pending State of Israel. The two leaders dine on pineapple chicken at the staff dining table in the noisy kitchen of the Copa.

Part 5

THE 2 AM SHOW

Chapter 15 – The Politics of Power

In 1948, the Copa is still far and away the undisputed top nightclub in the world, but Monte is worn out by fighting with Podell. Monte forces a vote of the principals counting on protégé and manager, Jack Entratter to vote with him and oust Podell. Entratter betrays Monte and votes for Podell, revealing his loyalty to Podell’s sponsor, Costello. Monte is voted out and loses control of the Copa. Costello pays him off with \$135,000. Monte’s friends and advisors scoff at the pittance offered in settlement but Monte, in his fury, refuses to negotiate and takes the offer. Monte’s name comes off the menu and front awning.

The Copa is handed over to Podell. Not being a showman, Podell relies on agents like Georgie Woods, the mob’s man at the William Morris agency, to supply performers and on choreographer Doug Coudy for the look of the shows. He continues to run the

kitchen and serving staff with an iron hand and becomes notorious for physically attacking press agents and comedians.

Monte is now free of Costello and Podell. He opens the nightclub La Vie en Rose in 1950 with the Copa payoff money. It is a break from his tropical motif and expresses a European elegance and maturity. It is Monte's personal favorite of all his clubs. His old friend Jackie Gleason conducts the orchestra at musician's union minimum scale for Dorothy Dandridge, Edith Piaf and Josephine Baker. The club is too small to support Monte's lavish shows and fails. Monte is investigated by the Kefauver Commission for racketeering with Costello. The FBI increases their surveillance. Jules Podell adds "Jules Podell's Copacabana" to the Copa logo.

Chapter 16 – Wandering in the Desert

Monte and Jane, and their three sons, move to Malibu, California. Monte opens restaurant and famed celebrity hangout Luce's across the street from Paramount Studios with partner Marshall Edson. The place does no dinner or liquor business since the actors all usually have early calls. The place fails.

Monte and Jane move back to Pennsylvania. Monte is rescued by his old friend and benefactor, Milton Blackstone. He is given the assignment by Blackstone to produce the TV show – "Coke Time" with Eddie Fisher. He pals around with old friend Jackie Gleason, the new king of TV. Gleason drags Monte along on an impromptu trip to Havana. They leave the Algonquin Hotel in their pajamas, fly to Havana to club hop for two days. They return to Bellevue Hospital in New York, have their blood changed and inhale oxygen to minimize their hangovers while they have their nails manicured. They are back at work Monday afternoon.

The Copa is going strong with new acts like Bobby Darin and Andy Williams. It becomes notorious for fights including a famous brawl by Yankee stars Billy Martin and Mickey Mantle. Two shooting incidents occur at the club but "...the fix is in" at City Hall. The city of New York does not pull the club's license to operate in spite of the violence. Maitre'd Carmine expects trouble one night and carries a hand grenade in his tuxedo pocket. Dozens of Copa girls and featured performers go on to movie careers. Movie moguls frequent the club scouting for talent.

Part 6

AFTER HOURS

Chapter 17 – Ladies and Gentlemen, Elvis Presley

Late in the 50s, rock and roll starts to replace Big Bands. TV begins to keep people at home and out of nightclubs. The Copa is in decline. Frank Sinatra is pressed into service to appear and revive the ailing club. The house band at the club has devolved into "ten angry men" as described by Sinatra's musical arranger Skitch Henderson. The band is so bad it prompts Sinatra to comment, "I should have brought the Harmonicats."

Mobsters Jigs Forlano, Ruby Stein and Little Augie Pisano take over supervising the operation with Jules Podell. Monday night is "wash night" where bets are placed and paid off to loan sharks. Podell continues to abuse performers. Podell's routine is now to begin his evenings with a water tumbler filled with brandy that he nurses throughout the three shows a night. One night, in a typical tirade, he locks singer Johnny Ray in the walk-in freezer where the singer catches pneumonia.

A string of failures crushes Monte's confidence and depletes his bank account.

While Monte has been failing, Frank Costello and the mafia have developed from powerful racketeers of nightclubs, hotels and racetracks into invincible international power brokers with their creation of Las Vegas. Monte accepts a job from his old Copa partner, Frank Costello, to become the Entertainment Director at the Tropicana Hotel in Las Vegas. Lew Walters of the Latin Quarter is also hired to produce a musical extravaganza based on his “Folies Bergere” motif. In 1957, Monte is on the payroll for \$5,000 a week. He moves his family of five boys to Beverly Hills.

Monte sees the end of the nightclub era and the complete conquest and legitimization of the mob through its extended empire centered in Las Vegas. He believes, like many people, that the mob is now so powerful that it will evolve into a series of legitimate corporations. He forms a company with gangster go-between Johnny Roselli and Howard Hughes to produce entertainment for the Hilton hotels worldwide. Meyer Lansky, overlord of the new empire, won’t give up that much business to an outside entity and quashes the deal. The FBI has been watching Roselli and now flags Monte’s file with an additional gangland association.

After years of prescriptions to aid sleep, Jane is now severely addicted to barbiturates and sleeps most of the day.

In the lobby of his home at the Majestic apartments in New York, Frank Costello is shot and wounded by Vincent “The Chin” Gigante. Receipts that correspond to the casino revenues from the Tropicana are found in Costello’s pocket. The Feds force the mob-tainted management out of the hotel including Monte. He is wiped out financially and publicly connected to the mob. Jane is forced to disperse their family of 5 boys to Jane’s relatives in Kingston, New York.

Chapter 18 - Sanctuary

Monte struggles to find a way to recover. He finds a group of local investors to build the Playhouse Inn, a restaurant with entertainment in New Hope, Pennsylvania. It is a perfect plan. He can re-unite the family again at the country estate, “The Farm”. The Playhouse Inn will also be his retirement insurance and will have no mob money attached.

By the end of the 1950s, a legendary era in entertainment is drawing to a close. One by one, the great nightclubs begin to fail. Alone among the old clubs, the Copa is still going strong featuring Bobby Darin, Don Rickles, Buddy Hackett, Frank Sinatra, Tom Jones and Sammy Davis Jr.

Dr. Max Jacobsen (Dr. Feelgood) injects his improvised vitamin/amphetamine “cocktails” into celebrities and prominent people including Senator John F. Kennedy, Marilyn Monroe, Eddie Fisher and Monte’s dearest friend and partner Milton Blackstone. Blackstone suffers paranoid psychosis brought on by the amphetamines in Jacobsen’s injections. Once one of the most powerful men in New York, Blackstone now wanders deranged and homeless in the Bowery. Monte loses a powerful ally.

Part 7

CLOSING TIME

Chapter 19 – Fabulous Las Vegas

Monte becomes entertainment director of the Thunderbird Hotel. He brings the first Broadway shows including, “High Button Shoes”, “Anything Goes” and “Flower Drum Song” to Las Vegas.

At the Copa, singer Bobby Darin silences the audience and announces, “Ladies and Gentlemen, a word from the management.” In the kitchen, Podell is overheard in action, “You fucking cocksuckers! I’ll break your fuckin’ legs!”

Darin says, “Thank you, Ladies and Gentlemen, this has been a message from the management. Now back to our regularly scheduled program.”

The famed Stork Club begins cut rate “Business Man’s Lunch” specials. The Latin Quarter closes. The Zanzibar closes. Elvis Presley sells out in Las Vegas.

In Bucks County, the local investors in the Playhouse Inn move to oust Monte citing his mob connections. Monte wins a small settlement but loses the Playhouse Inn. His dream of his own retirement place in the country is shattered.

In New York, Frank Costello makes it clear to Vito Genovese that he wants to step down as mob boss. Genovese strips Costello of all power, even his points in the Copacabana. Costello is allowed to retire gracefully.

Monte struggles to find his footing in the changing entertainment scene. He produces a musical special for NBC at the Hollywood Bowl with Louis Armstrong. He takes a job as a host at Meyer Lansky’s Fontainebleu in Miami Beach. A local Bucks County restaurateur partners with Monte to open a club in Hightstown, New Jersey - an abysmal, embarrassing failure. It looks like Monte is finally, completely finished. In 1967, the IRS slaps him with a 30 year-old claim of unpaid back taxes for \$850,000. Monte is broke and unemployed. The IRS places a lien on “The Farm”. Once again the family is dispersed. The older boys live at college or with friends while they finish high school. The youngest boy, Tim, returns to Kingston with Jane to seek refuge in Jane’s mother’s house for the second time in ten years. Monte, now 62 and diabetic, lives with the second

youngest son, Jim, in the Logan Inn, a hotel in New Hope, Pennsylvania. Ironically, the Logan was where Monte and Jane had hosted their lively wedding reception twenty years earlier at the beginning of their lives together.

As the 1970s dawn, Jules Podell refuses to move on. He books second tier rock and roll bands into the Copa to play for high school graduation parties. Hamburgers and french fries are served during the show. When Podell dies in 1971, no one outside of his immediate family comes to his funeral. In 1973, 33 years after it opened, the Copacabana finally closes its doors and passes into legend. Within months, the doors at 10 E. 60th Street open again. The legendary Copacabana becomes the newest type of nightspot – a discotheque.

Chapter 20 – Lights Out

Monte “sells” their beloved country home “The Farm” to his accountant for one dollar to shelter it from an IRS sale. Monte, Jane and their two youngest sons move back home. In spite of 20 years of financial and personal turmoil, Monte and Jane’s love endures and sustains them. They are finally united again at home with their sons. Jane begins to recover from her barbiturate addiction and registers for classes to become a Licensed Practical Nurse.

Monte is saved by the kindness of his country neighbors. Local developers offer Monte a farmhouse that they have renovated into a country inn. He calls the place “The Little Club” after the classy New York nightspot run by his old friend Billy Reed. Monte finds his retirement business in this quiet, country inn. It’s the end of the road for the “saloonkeeper”.

In February, 1973, gangster Frank Costello, Monte’s self-appointed partner and blight on Monte’s life, dies of a heart attack at home on Long Island.

In April, 1973, having lived to see his most enduring creation, the Copacabana, die of old age and then be reborn for a new generation, Monte dies peacefully, surrounded by his family at home.

Epilogue

Today, in 2002, the Copa lounge is a chic clothing boutique. Sunlight sparkles across its bright wood floor and off the silver metal racks where a few select black outfits hang quietly. Attractive sales people demur to the customers, keeping their opinions to themselves. Downstairs in the showroom, a similarly clean looking restaurant goes quietly about its business with modern elegance. This part of town, at the foot of the posh penthouses of Fifth Avenue, has returned to its natural equilibrium.

But across town on the rough edged Westside, the irrepressible Copacabana has bloomed again like a scarlet passion flower on the sandy beach of Rio de Janiero. It has reappeared from the mists of time like Camelot, welcoming all who quicken to the music of life. Hot samba rhythms once again syncopate the heartbeats of sleepless lovers. They sway together in the music, surrounded by laughter and conversation, heart beating against heart, until the sun rises. They dance the dance of passionate love and exuberant life that is the essence of the Copacabana, and my father's true legacy.



Jane and Monte at the Copa - 1946

Part One

THE DINNER SHOW

Chapter 1

Cocktail Hour

Around Broadway they were starting to say Frank Sinatra was finished, cooked, “...couldn’t get arrested.” His records weren’t selling, his Lucky Strike Radio show was faltering, his flamboyant affair with Ava Gardner was losing him fans and draining his strength. One night, as he hung around the circular bar in the Hotel 14 above the Copa, not wanting to show his face downstairs in the main room, Toni Williams, a Copa girl, arrived and sat a few stools away. Sinatra sidled over, struck up a conversation. More than anything, he hated to be alone, especially now, when it looked like he might be returning to Hoboken a 25 year-old has-been. He made a play for Toni just as her date for the evening, handsome, young Tom Corbally,

showed up. As the couple was leaving, Corbally turned to Sinatra and kidded him, "Next time I see you I'm gonna change the channel." Sinatra was so low he couldn't even rise to the joke. "Don't do that," the demoralized young singer said, "Everybody else is doing it."

This was one of the lowest points in the singer's career and life. Within a few days he would turn to powerful friends for help. The friends made a few calls. One of the first calls went out to the Copacabana.

Monte Proser usually sat at table 4G, just off the dance floor a little to the right of center when he auditioned acts for the Copa. It was the family table, which made him feel a little better. On this typical day at work, which usually started at about 4:30 in the afternoon, Monte wasn't very upbeat. Last night's three shows and five or six Dewars and soda had left him with a squinting hangover. He turned his attention to the stage where the final bars of "Poor Butterfly" wavered from a young hopeful. A pretty young girl from... somewhere, he forgot exactly where. Monte was starting to enjoy the song as Jack Entratter, the towering Copa manager, placed a heavy black telephone on the table with **Plaza 8-1060** printed in bold black letters on a white paper medallion in the center of the metal dial.

"It's him." Entratter handed his boss the receiver. Monte noted the seriousness on his manager's face. He cleared his head and brought all his concentration to this conversation. He held the receiver slightly away from his tender head, softening the sound, "Yeah."

"Monte, how are ya?"

"Okay. What's the news?"

"I'd like you to give this Sinatra kid a week.."

The request seemed trivial coming from one of the most powerful men in the world. It instantly tripped Monte's internal alarm. He drew a sharp breath as adrenaline rushed in to clear his mind. The caller's negotiating skills were legendary and his power was absolute. A missed cue or poorly chosen word could cost a life's work, and more.

"Frank's a good kid, good singer." Monte parried with a neutral compliment. Everybody knew the Copa was booked solid.

"He didn't want to ask. He's got a lotta pride." On the other end of the line, Frank Costello, consul of the Syndicate, dubbed the "Prime Minister" of the mafia by the FBI, was impatient but as always, cordial.

"Things that bad, huh?" Again, Monte stayed neutral and probed for information. Was this the opening bid of a power squeeze? A subtle test of loyalty? Or simply what it appeared to be, a friendly request?

"Woman trouble. He's all mixed up. It'd be a personal favor to me." Costello didn't like to hear about trouble of any kind. In his line of work it usually meant people got hurt which was often the cost of doing business - and he was very concerned with keeping costs down.

Costello used "me" which could mean it was actually a request. If he'd used "us", meaning the people he spoke for, it would be a command and a clear power grab. In any case, Monte decided it was wise to appear to give ground. No sense risking a personal insult over a move this small, "I'll have to move a few things around. Have his guys call me. Okay?"

"Okay, Monte."

It was another successful negotiation for the Prime Minister. For Monte, it was confirmation that another fly like himself had hit the spider's web spun by Frank Costello, Lucky Luciano and Meyer Lansky. The talented young singer from Hoboken was now indebted to the

Syndicate. He liked Sinatra. The singer was a little hot-headed but he was a stand-up guy, loyal to his friends and had great style. He'd give Sinatra two weeks, just to show he was calling the shots, not Costello, and make sure the kid got a good boost. He'd make it a come-back event with a hold-over week. He knew he could count on the big guns, Walter Winchell and Ed Sullivan, to put it in their columns like that. The others, Earl Wilson, Mark Hellinger and Jack O'Brian would follow. Dorothy Kilgallen you couldn't count on. Sinatra was on his own with her.

The manager of the young hopeful on stage munched Sen-Sen like a menthol locomotive and breathed into Monte's face making his headache worse. "Whaddya think? Isn't she great!" the manager asked with everything he had on the line. Monte looked at the young girl on the dance floor in front of him, who would make a great singing waitress somewhere, smiling wide enough to dislocate her jaw.

"She's really something." Monte said as he shielded his eyes for a moment from the glaring white tablecloth. The manager thought he was contemplating an offer and jumped in.

"She's a humdinger! What dates were you thinking of?"

Monte was thinking maybe the day after he died, which might be tomorrow if his hangover got worse, but he didn't want to be nasty. They looked like nice people.

"I'll call you." He couldn't manage more.

The manager's smile started to wobble.

"I'll call you." Monte nailed home as he noticed Irving Lazar, the young music agent, striding across the room toward him. He knew he was in for an earful. Irving was relentless.

The manager knew he was sunk, "Sure, sure. Okay. I'll be hearing from you, yeah."

“She’s a terrific singer, really,” Monte said. He was thinking of the girl and wanted to salve the rejection he had to inflict on her.

“A humdinger. That’s for sure.” The manager motioned angrily to the girl, faked a final smile and left with his talented burden without looking back.

Monte nursed his tomato juice, as Irving sat down, uninvited, and started chewing his ear about Johnny Pineapple. Monte loosened his tie while Irving promoted his “discovery”. The truth was that he’d been trying to sell this same band yesterday when it was called the Billy Chesterfield something or other. Now it was Johnny Pineapple, renamed to fit with the Copa’s tropical theme. You had to hand it to Irving, he was fast and had more chutzpah than Eskimos got snow.

“Look, Swifty. I’ll take the band, Johnny Pineapple, for a week. Three fifty.”

“Swifty?” The little agent wasn’t sure if he liked having a nickname, but the calculating was over before the thought was even complete. If Monte Proser wants to call me Swifty, and book my guys into the Copa, okay by me. “And there’s expenses...”

Monte rubbed his forehead and sighed. Last night’s Dewars was pushing against the walls of his skull. Survival instinct quickly lifted Irving “Swifty” Lazar out of his seat.

“Three fifty’s fine, great. They’ll be here.” The young music agent was out the door before Monte looked up.

“Expenses.” Monte said to himself. He was amused by Swifty. He reminded him of himself.

Monte rested his head in his hands. He just hoped the phone wouldn’t ring again as he plotted his way around the line up. Sinatra, for two weeks, I gotta bump Eartha, she’ll scream. He needed to lie down. He got up, dodged the young Filipino man vacuuming the carpet and

padded delicately toward the bar. He passed by massive support columns that had been made over into stout white palm trees. On the walls, large draped plaster swags were painted in wide stripes of rust red and white echoing the beach cabanas of the real Copacabana. Clusters of tropical fruits hung from the swags and art deco blue lights created the moonlit aura over rust red banquettes that lined the walls. Every detail of the Copa décor was pure showmanship and escapism.

Monte climbed from floor level up the two elevated tiers that surrounded the 24 by 40 foot stage floor. The stage was narrow to begin with, but on busy nights, as more tables were placed up front for important customers, it got even smaller. Customers and performers were often so close that it was common for Copa girls to knock over drinks with the hems of their dresses when they twirled. Beads of sweat from featured performers, particularly dance teams, often sprayed the front row landing in customers' drinks.

Monte made it to the bar, leaned on it, "Joey," he murmured and nodded ever so slightly to the bartender who slapped down a shot glass and poured a Dewars. "Tickety boo." Monte saluted and downed the shot. He exhaled the fiery fumes and placed the glass back on the gleaming wood. Everything was quiet in the club except for the reassuring vacuuming of the carpet and the dull clinking in the kitchen as the Filipino chef Pedro Pujal and the kitchen crew started their preparations. Monte looked back over his creation. Above the stage was a bold relief mural of Copacabana beach under moonlight. It was framed by the massive white palms creating the theatrical illusion of an exotically romantic place a thousand miles away from New York City. Monte tried to lose himself in the scene for a moment, to rest and relieve his aggravation.

Except for his hangover, it might seem like Monte Proser should be grinning from ear to ear. He was 44, rich, famous and married to Jane Ball, one of the most beautiful of his Copa Girls. He and Jane had a healthy one year old son, Charles, named after Monte's father, and another one on the way. His name had been on the front of the world's hottest nightclub for the past eight years and the mention of it would open any door. He had more fun in a week than most people had in a year and had lost more money at Aqueduct racetrack than most people would make in their lifetimes. His taste, talent and power as a producer were unassailable, yet he could not control his own creation, the Copa. The first class nightclub that bore his name, was being turned into a mobster clip joint and it was making him sick with fury.

At the end of the bar, Jack Entratter was finishing his second coffee and smoke of the day - his eye-opener. It was close to five in the afternoon which was mid-morning for nightclub guys like Jack who never woke up before noon.

He knew a call from Costello didn't usually help his boss' state of mind. He saw Monte throw back the shot of booze and could see the storm clouds descending. Monte would be turning the problem over in his mind again, for the ten millionth time. The booze was getting to him. For every moment of relief it gave him, it was putting him deeper in the hole. His afternoon naps were starting to be a regular thing. He was drinking more and earlier. By nine or ten he'd be loaded and his conversations were losing their sparkle, taking on a nasty, cutting humor. Entratter mentioned it and got waved off for his effort. He didn't want to see Monte drown in a bottle of Scotch, but if he did, well, it wouldn't be too bad for his own career. Someone would have to fill the gap.

"I gotta lay down for a minute. You uh..." Monte motioned up toward the front door.

"Sure, Monte. I'll open up." Entratter said.

Monte moved off toward the manager's office. He climbed the main stairs toward the lounge and street level, his mind fully clouded with the problem. The Copa was slipping from his control and he was powerless to stop it. The face of the problem, the only part he could get his hands on, was Frank Costello's watchdog manager, Jules Podell. The bigger problem was the quicksand of corruption that had spread to City Hall, had swallowed entire countries like Cuba and was now engulfing the state of Nevada.

Jules Podell was plundering the Copa like a rum-soaked pirate – padding customer's checks, shaking down concessionaires and grifting vendors with nickel and dime schemes. His last job had been managing Costello's Kit Kat Club, a late night, hand-job under the table, strip joint on Broadway and 50th. Before that he was a leg breaker for Meyer Lansky. He had several convictions for assault and battery and dodged a murder rap due to jury amnesia. In the first years of the Copa, Podell had been confined to the kitchen, technically "off the premises" due to his felony convictions and clear ties with Costello. He was kept in check by the watchful eye of Mayor LaGuardia's City Hall. Now that the Syndicate's man, Bill O'Dwyer, was in the Mayor's chair at City Hall, Podell was out of his pen and gorging on the Copa like a pig in a flower garden. This was the unsolvable problem that drove Monte to the bottle and then to bed each day. You can't fight City Hall.

To Monte the Copa was more than just a hot nightclub. He already had a string of successful clubs from Miami to Providence, Rhode Island. It was more than the money, even though he had taken the longest long shot of his career and turned a jinxed white elephant into a \$25,000 dollar a night Niagara of cash. The Copa was simply everything Monte had learned in

twenty years of hanging around the gin joints and backstages of Broadway. It was his mark, his signature, his unique vision.

He had built his creation into the Mecca of the entertainment industry. It was the well from which Broadway and Hollywood drew their talent. Dozens of performers like Frank Sinatra, Nat King Cole, Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis got the boost that made their careers at the Copa. A shot at the Copa for any performer meant they had made it. Monte didn't book headliners, he created them. He revived careers of older vaudevillians like Jimmy Durante and gave new performers like Nat King Cole a place in the Copa's spotlight. This was the special excitement of the Copa – riveting performances by new and rediscovered entertainers. A show at the Copa promised the thrill of discovery.

In the manager's office, Monte sat down on the brown leather couch and untied his gleaming English broughams – the finest shoes money could buy. Across the room, his desk was covered with newspapers. The floor around the desk was piled with press books filled with newspaper clippings dating back eight years to opening night in 1940. This was how he gauged the Copa's success, not in money or attendance but in ink. What were his friends saying in their columns and more importantly, how often were they saying it?

He aligned his splendid shoes neatly, a personal ritual that signaled a time to rest and contemplate. He slumped into the couch and closed his eyes. In a moment, his mind was calm, the annoyances were put aside as he contemplated the sheer granite wall of the problem. Simply, he was as powerless as a small boy in short pants before his overlord Frank Costello, the ultimate authority. The sting of recognition opened his eyes. The relationship to Costello was just like the relationship he once had with his imperious father. Like his father, Costello held the power of life and death over him. Both men constrained his independence, both freely imposed their

will on him, neither one could be overruled. Both were civilized and discreet. He couldn't hate them. They forced compromises that allowed him to survive, but poisoned him slowly, killing him by degrees. Thirty years ago he could run away, but now he just stared at the piles of news clippings stacked against his wall like silent hacked out tongues, and wanted a drink. He realized he lost his courage. He'd compromised for so long, swallowed so much poison, that now he was too weak to fight. Where was that fearless boy who faced down a tyrant and freed himself? He fought the urge to get another drink. He needed to remember who that boy was. He closed his eyes and stared into his past, searching for a clue to the courage he'd lost.

A small boy in short pants slipped his father's grasp and scooted down the steep gangplank of the massive steel ocean liner Aquitania. Meyer Marcus Prosser raced ahead of his father, Charles, and his two younger sisters, Isabel and Annette. He was eleven years old and impossible to restrain. The excitement of being in America was too great. Monte raced to the end of the gangplank ignoring his father's shouts, pushing past disembarking passengers and luggage, heedless of tearing his expensive clothes. He had to be the first to set foot in America. At the end of the gangplank he stopped. He surveyed the jumble of activity on the dock. The first clear voice he heard was a newspaper boy yelling headlines in several languages. Suddenly, he leaped as far as his legs could propel him and landed in America like a swashbuckling musketeer, ready for adventure. He scouted his new home from the fetid docks of Baltimore as he waited for the girls and the old man to catch up. It was the 4th of July, 1915.

Charles held the younger girls fast. His son's lapse of decorum would not be repeated. They strode down the gangplank at a dignified pace. The young family was dressed for their arrival in America as if they were meeting royalty. Charles, the patriarch, wore a monocle dangling from the silk waistcoat of his dark suit, the girls wore matching blue sailor suits with

white piping and Monte, now standing on the dock like a young conqueror, was elegant in his black velvet knickers and matching jacket.

That evening, the wild little Jewish boy saw fireworks for the first time. The terror and beauty of the exploding art tattooed a sense of spectacle and enchantment onto his mind that he would never forget. Charles told him it was created just for them. Monte believed his father just enough to accept this as his personal booming welcome to his new home. The boy leaped with joy at each new explosion as his sisters clung to their father's arms. The wonder and enthusiasm that would transform Meyer Marcus Prosser into Monte Proser, was ignited that evening.

Baltimore churned night and day with immigrants and industry. New arrivals like the Prosser family jostled with people from a dozen countries on the cobbled streets reeking of ammonia from horse urine. Like many of their new neighbors, the family had fled to America to escape the pressures that were building across Europe toward war. Jews were being routinely scapegoated as the cause of widespread deprivation and were persecuted by various governments as the source of civil unrest.

Years before his children were born, Charles fled from the murderous Russian pogroms to England where the enmity of his Christian neighbors was somewhat less deadly. There, in the drizzly northern mill town of Widnes, he married and began his family. He discovered that the English had new curses but the same ready blame for Jews as the cause of the world's problems. Charles saw the growing storm clouds of European war and knew from experience that any maelstrom would hit Jews the hardest. He could only hope that an ocean would put enough distance between his young family and the coming storm.

The family found a suitable apartment on Harvey Street in South Baltimore and Charles set about taking on the great American pastime, business. With his command of languages, he

found ready work as an import agent deciphering bills of lading in a dozen languages and translating them into English. He had developed his ear for foreign languages in the Russian court of Czar Nicholas II where he wrote correspondence for the Czar's functionaries to distant governments. He also recorded evidence of the convulsions of hatred called pogroms in which hundreds his fellow Russian Jews were murdered under the direction of local governors. This developed not only his skill as a linguist but his permanent distrust of governments and almost all of the people they governed.

Charles enrolled his children in a private Jewish school or *schul*, which held absolutely no attraction for Monte. He fidgeted and daydreamed of the moment he would be let loose for the day. He was itching to be out running in the streets.

America was a combination candy store and amusement park compared to the drafty Northern England tenements where Monte had grown up, and he played it for all he could get. He pitched pennies on the corner until he learned to shoot crap and smoked cigarettes he bought with his winnings. Luck rolled from his fingertips and a rich stew of American slang rolled through his clipped British burr obscuring all but the hard edges in words like "bottle" which, until the end of his days, was sounded with a glottal stop after the t's. In America, particularly in Baltimore, a Southern city at its heart, the Jews were only one of the many targets of prejudice and benefited from the lack of focus. Some of them, like Charles Prosser, had money and education, and at least they weren't black. Epithets, insults and wisecracks all mixed into the vulgar poetry of the underclass and erupted into slang, jazz, and noir novels of inner city life. Soon, the only proper outsiders were farmers: the hayseeds, the sodbusters, the clodhoppers. City blacks and whites were beginning to mix, urbanize and separate from their sharecropper cousins.

Monte soaked America into his pores. He had the education, clothes and upbringing to come off European if he needed to and the jazz in his soul to hold court at the pool hall. He played both as needed in his new life of late nights and smoky hangouts. He began to develop into a tough little bantam with thick arms, a smart mouth and quick fists.

Even as a boy, he felt America gearing up to eclipse the Old World through the sheer exuberance described in terms like Yankee ingenuity, get up and go, and a friendly Yiddish term that was coming into the language slowly, chutzpah. He knew this because he devoured everything on the newsstands - all the newspapers, all the magazines, all the pulp novels. He found his heroes in books and devoted himself to reading. This devotion to reading would continue throughout his life. Once he read about the world that was available to him, he was uncontainable. Monte was in love with this new culture that made raw ambition into riches. His real school day started at about 6 PM when responsible people were just getting home from their days of hard work. The months couldn't pass quickly enough for him. The dizzying realization that in America, you could grow up to be anything you wanted, fostered opulent fantasies of his grown up self - first as a cowboy, then as an airplane pilot, then a detective and always, somehow, fantastically rich.

Charles chafed, waiting for this wildness to pass. The boy was now nearly 13 and he hoped Monte's volcanic energy and reckless behavior were just phases of approaching puberty. What had his own suffering been about if not to teach responsibility and vigilance? He began to rein in his son. His eldest boy was going to go to an American university and be a professional something, someone of substance, someone to be reckoned with. He had to anchor the family. The girls would be educated, marry, and go off with their husbands, but Monte held the possibility of achievement and triumph over the past. The father knew of the late nights. He

smelled the tobacco on Monte's clothes and he heard the slang of the uneducated at his dinner table. A battle of 30 years began between two iron wills.

Chapter 2

Bawdy Houses and Ragtime Music

Monte craned his neck up to look at the sliver of twilight between his building and the next. The buildings were so close he could have leaned out of his window and touched the bricks of his neighbor. The space was too narrow for a proper breeze and sunlight touched his window only a few minutes a day.

"They sent a note from schul," Isabel said. "You are sleeping in class."

The gas street lamp in front of the building suddenly lit up and threw a pale yellow glow across the greasy bricks in front of Monte's face. It was his signal. The noise of the working day would soon fade into ragtime piano and impolite laughter. He pulled his head back in from the stench of fish and engine exhaust that was constant from the docks nearby.

"Don't you care what he thinks, or how he feels?" she implored her older brother while she sewed his pants, damaged from the previous night's carousing.

"I care," Monte replied.

"Are you going out again?"

"Just to see a few friends."

Isabel stitched while Annette rolled a wooden boat across the wavy floorboards.

"Do you think I'm pretty, at all?"

Monte watched his sister sewing in the yellow glow of a kerosene lamp.

"You can be honest," she said.

"You look fine. Why ask me?" he dodged.

"You see a lot of people, women. You have your opinions..."

"I think it's a daft question. May I have my trousers?"

"I think I'm not ever going to be very pretty. I think not."

Annette sailed her boat into the waves in front of her 11-year-old face. She piped up, "You have beautiful red hair Isabel."

Isabel was stoic but Monte knew what she knew. They were not pretty people. They had matured from young children to teenagers and their adult features were now distinct. They had large, rounded noses, smallish eyes and thin lips. Monte looked at his sister and did not have the heart to tell the truth, or to lie.

"You're one of a kind," he said. It was enough truth and enough lie. Isabel was salved by her brother's kindness but the truth was blunter than he was. She smiled bravely as she snapped the delicate thread and handed him his mended pants. Monte pulled on the fine wool pants and inspected the mending carefully by the lamp. He sighed a little at the imperfection. Isabel had helped the hired lady that day with the family laundry and held out a pressed white shirt. Monte looked it over quickly and slipped it on. He checked the cuff length, unbuttoned his pants and neatly tucked the shirttails around him, straightened the line of the fly with his shirt front buttons. His black hair was freshly cut and sleek with fragrant pomade. He'd graduated from a short pants ragamuffin to the cultivated look of the well-dressed men he saw in detective magazines. This was the one area he and his father agreed on. A man was always to be impeccably dressed. Fine fabrics, understated and conservative colors.

Charles entered the apartment, a copy of the socialist newspaper THE WORKER folded under his arm. He saw Monte preparing for the afternoon shift at Western Union. He knew the job as a delivery boy took his son to unsavory neighborhoods in Baltimore and exposed him to all sorts of people, but the boy was simply too energetic to be contained. The furious pace at which he roller-skated to deliver his dispatches made him a valuable asset to Western Union and dissipated some of his excess energy. Charles was out of tactics against his son's waywardness. He couldn't make Monte study or take work seriously. He couldn't honestly use religion since he himself wasn't religious. He could only make rules and enforce them with the tone of his voice which still was commanding and held some power over the boy.

"Stop," he commanded and Monte suddenly noticed his father as if it was a true surprise, as if this monumental presence could really have been overlooked. In an instant Monte sized up his father and found him unprepared for battle. The old man was exhausted after a day of translating and sorting endless mind-numbing manifests of merchandise. Monte had the advantage of a pressing appointment. He seized it immediately, "Hello, Papa. I was just going."

"Come." The old man commanded and Monte approached. The steel rimmed bifocals were adjusted for punctuation. "I want you to remember your mother when you're out and running wild. She would not have you out and associating with some of the lower type of characters in these places you go to. Do you understand?"

"Yes, papa."

"Do you really? I want you to think. Stand here and think."

Monte was deeply affected by the memory of Lena and clung to it with the devotion of the religious. He resented his father for using it this way. It was private and sacred, and not

to be trotted out for lessons in obedience. He stiffened as heat poured through him while he fought against seeing her face. He saw her rich brown eyes dancing with diamond reflections from the coal fire as she leaned in to kiss him goodnight. He stroked the fine down on her smooth cheeks. Then he saw her face as grey as the ash in a cold iron stove.

She had died in childbirth delivering his little brother Leo. It had been just over a year ago in the drafty tenement house on Swan Street, under the gloom and coal smoke of northern England. The birth had nearly killed little Leo as well. His spine was damaged and he was frail, weighing less than five pounds. He was given over to the special care of Lena's relatives since Charles was unequipped to care for Leo and his three other children now that Lena was gone. For months Leo lingered between life and death. The horror of his birthday remained an open question, would it claim him too? Spring arrived to wash the black dusted snow from the streets of Widnes and Leo began to gain weight. His agony seemed to subside as his tiny body healed around his crooked spine. Charles let the possible funeral arrangements for his fourth child drift from his daily thoughts and turned toward the future. He had three other children to think of and war was about to engulf Europe. Lena's death had snuffed out the one tender hope he held for the world. All was now lamp black and the price of coal, ranks of soulless numbers and stacks of grubby 5 pound notes in the landlord's hand. Life was work and war and what to buy for dinner. How would these children ever grow up and would the Jewish people even survive? His thoughts slowly turned to paving stones that would bear any weight. He laid them down, end to end, making a solid, unremarkable road through a filthy world. They were chinked tight permitting no bloom or sprout between them. This is the road his children would follow. To wander from it, even a foot, would bring them only death and horror.

Monte had loved his mother like the sun and she had doted on him, her handsome first-born and prince of her modest kingdom. They had a special language that pretended to treat him as a prince and she as his dutiful Queen. He was born to strike out on adventures and quests of bravery from which she, as a Victorian, a Jew and a woman, had been discreetly forbidden. This life chafed like her whalebone corset, yet it seemed these restrictions were the price of love, the one thing above all else that she must have. And so she hid her adventurer's heart like her corset under layers of womanly frill, burying her dreams to fulfill her family's expectations. She was a kind, obedient daughter and became a faithful Jewish wife and mother. Then Monte was born and she saw her horizons expand. She would live through him. Into his quick and receptive mind she poured all her dreams. Monte was her knight errant, a bright and energetic soul who would stand large in the world. Monte was her Lancelot, and she was his wise Queen.

From the moment Monte looked on his mother's bloodless face and saw the black soaked sheets that had soaked up her life, he did not speak for several weeks. The first few days after she was shrouded and carried from the house, he sat silently watching the coal fire in the parlor stove. He didn't look away from the yellow flames, didn't speak. He was sent outside but sat on the front steps silent, inert. The world had shifted on its axis and the familiar was foreign to him. People he didn't recognize said hello, streets with no names drew him in. He could walk them without seeing her walking beside him. They sheltered him with shadows. The Queen was dead, the kingdom vanished, the brave knight was a heartbroken little boy wandering mindlessly through a gray world.

Without his mother's protection, Monte was subjected to his father's strict and autocratic rule. And Charles, without Lena's gentle persuasion, could only demand and eventually bluster with threats of dire discipline. There was never a real threat of violence from Charles, nothing like what Monte saw every night in the gin mills along the docks of Baltimore, but shame and disapproval were used to some effect. Monte bore the dunnings with a convict's steely resolution. He listened to the warnings of imminent poverty, disgusting and filthy occupations that awaited, squandering of family resources, the younger siblings who would be led astray; and he bided his time. Something big, something wild awaited him in America. If he looked hard enough and worked fast enough, it would sweep him away. He waited for his father's indignation and ominous predictions to wind down and was resolute in himself.

Charles saw the anger and knew he'd stumbled. It was hopeless. The boy could not be reached, at least not right now. He wanted to grab him and shake him but the time had passed for that type of discipline. Monte was taut and ready. "Go, " he said. Monte turned away sharply. He grabbed his roller skates by the door.

"Bring me tobacco please."

Monte was obliged to turn back. He took the quarter from his father, glanced quickly at his implacable face and was out the door and into his real life.

Outside on the sidewalk, Monte put on his roller skates and proudly slung his Western Union message pouch over his shoulder, making sure the yellow letters were clearly visible. He was now a young man of 14 sprouting in height and electrified with animal energy. He bolted down the sidewalk dodging late shoppers and hopped off the curb into traffic, frightening horses as he flew. Monte was forced to be a daredevil speed skater because he

had to compete with grown men on bicycles who were also working for the Harvey Street Western Union office. Charles would not buy Monte a bicycle fearing his son would be as reckless on a bike as he was on skates. One area that Monte did not have to compete in was appearance. He was the most well tailored and groomed messenger Western Union may have ever had. His north England burr and smart outfits drew taunts from the other messengers but tips from the customers. Monte was paid three dollars a week to deliver telegrams all over South Baltimore. He wore out two pairs of roller skates on that job and knew his way around the city better than many of the natives. Errands became the currency that Monte traded within his growing network of shopkeepers, housewives and tradesmen. If a housewife needed a loaf of bread, Monte dropped the message at the bakery on his way to a paid delivery for Western Union. He often did it without coming to a complete stop. He carried the news for everybody and in return reaped the human connections he loved.

“He’s a firecracker!” little Annette said excitedly as she watched her big brother race down the street. The older sister Isabel, like her father, took a more sober view. It seemed like Monte was tending to everyone’s business but his own. He was too generous with his time and too giving of his attention to other people. He was developing what became his trademark “big-heartedness”.

“Dissipation, “ was the word Charles used as he peered over his pince-nez eyeglasses at his wayward son. He had reduced his lectures to one word so Monte could focus on the meaning. The boy was commanded to look up the word and present its dictionary definition to his father the following day. This was followed by a brief discussion and forced time of reflection. It was an unpleasant and usually unprofitable exercise since the focus of Monte’s

life was set. It was simply unrecognizable to Charles. Monte was really only interested in having fun with people. It had already become his life's work.

Monte delivered telegrams to every type of business including warehouses, pool halls, taverns and rough dockside boardinghouses where sailors who didn't speak English and hadn't seen dry land in months took their pleasure where they found it. It was an education in human nature that profoundly affected him and shattered the refinements his father had worked so hard to instill. The breaking point finally arrived in the spring of 1918 when Monte was 14 and beginning to have an interest in women.

Madame Claire ran a "boardinghouse" for women that specialized in short stays for visiting sailors, usually about an hour. The piano player in the parlor played a distinctive type of music that was emerging from the South at that time, that he called "rags." While delivering a telegram to Madame Claire, Monte became captivated by the music and the black man playing it. This was the first black man Monte had ever spoken to. He would have stayed longer to listen but the teenage messenger boy was not allowed to linger in the house.

As spring progressed and warmed the streets of South Baltimore, the street side windows of Madame Claire's were opened to allow in the freshened air. Monte would often make detours on his errands to listen to the ragtime piano under the open windows, sometimes skating to the music on the sidewalk in front of the house. One day after school and before Charles came home, he dragged both Isabel and little Annette to listen to the new music. He had been shooed away from the sidewalk before, so Monte snuck with his sisters through the back alley to listen at the back door. He knew all the back alleys in South

Baltimore. He used them as shortcuts on his messenger runs. They often held the most interesting activities like dice games and cock fights.

A round, very black skinned woman with enormous breasts and a child clinging to her checkered skirt, opened the back door of Madame Claire's to throw scraps to the alley cats and found the teenager and his two wide eyed younger sisters standing at the door. The smell of cigars and boiling beans wafted from the dark interior of the place. Monte stood up straight introduced himself and explained in his best formal English that he was a regular employee of the Western Union company and a business acquaintance of Madame Claire. He had found himself in the neighborhood when he and his sisters happened to hear the "exceptional" music coming from the house "...even better than the music hall, I believe."

The woman seemed to be amused by the dapper young music critic and his two small accomplices. She permitted the children to stay and listen at the backdoor. "But don't you step one foot in this house," she warned. She left the door open a crack, so they could hear her slender, mulatto husband play ragtime piano in the parlor. Monte nudged his ear into the crack of the door, while Isabel began to fret. She knew they were doing something wrong, somehow. Suddenly Monte's ear was pinched between a huge white thumb and forefinger and Monte was dragged into the house kitchen. Isabel was told to come in as well. She dragged Annette by the hand. Immediately Annette began to cry.

"What are you spying on?" the policeman asked Monte. The chambermaid tried to come to their defense but the policeman was having none of it.

"What are you spying on, eh?" He proceeded to upbraid the children for being where they didn't belong and was convinced that they were spying. This was not a place for children and their parents would be terribly ashamed. Monte's ear was growing bright red

under the policeman's thumb. Madame Claire came into the kitchen to see what all the commotion was about. A shouting match began that brought partially clothed sailors and tradesmen running from the upstairs rooms down into the parlor and out the front door. Monte tried his best to explain that he had met Madame Claire as a messenger for Western Union, which did no good at all. He was dragged by his ear across the parlor. The policeman was handed his hat, kissed fully on the lips and pushed out the front door.

Isabel was thoroughly shocked by the kiss. She had never before seen two adults kiss that way. It seemed particularly inappropriate for a policeman in such a dire situation as the current one. She was speechless for nearly half a block. Then she suddenly let loose with a torrent of explanation and pleading that did absolutely nothing to dissuade the officer or loosen his grip on her brother's ear. She explained that they were only listening to the music, that they had not stepped foot inside the house. By now, Annette was wailing so loudly that people stopped on the street to see what was the matter. The policeman marched the children the three blocks to their apartment and was greeted by a few curious neighbors who told him the childrens' father would be home soon. The neighbors clucked their tongues as they looked at the three young suspects with disdain. Isabel continued to explain that their father was a good father and Monte was a good boy who had never been in trouble before. She might as well have been a fly on a passing horse carriage for all the attention he paid her. He let go of Monte's ear like rolling a crumb from his hand giving him an extra cruel tweek of disdain. Both of Monte's hand went to his head as he rocked in pain. Isabel had had enough. She saw the officer lift his hat and wipe his brow. The top button of his heavy wool tunic was undone and he needed a shave. Her father's word for such a man was rapsallion – a base, low character.

“You kissed that woman, and you shouldn’t have!” she shot at him. He turned slowly to her, placing his dirty hand on his long black nightstick for emphasis.

“ Do you want to go to jail?” he warned. “And your whole family with you?”

Monte wasn’t in so much pain that he couldn’t manage a kick in her direction to shut her up. She realized she had overstepped and fell silent. She wouldn’t meet his stare and comforted Annette instead. At least she’d gotten his attention and was satisfied in that much.

Soon Charles approached and an informal hearing was held within earshot of the passing neighbors. The policeman explained the disgraceful behavior of the children in regard to a certain bawdy house allowing that the eldest boy was no doubt the instigator. Charles was sullen and apologetic addressing the man as sir and officer. The policeman left with a stern warning to Charles and to Monte. As soon as the policeman turned to resume his patrol they all scaled the four flights of stairs to the family’s apartment.

Inside the apartment, a chill settled in that might have stopped a weaker heart. Charles had reached the end of his patience with Monte. From that moment it was as if martial law had been declared. Monte was no longer allowed to work for his beloved Western Union and he was no longer going to attend schul with the other Jewish children. Any chance that Monte had for getting a bicycle was now destroyed. Charles believed that the only place Monte could be learning his wild behavior was from his classmates. Charles was going to take control of the children’s education himself. He was not about to let the corrupting influences of America taint his children’s character. It would not sway them from the narrow road he was paving toward a secure future. He would not have it.

The following day he hired the children’s regular nanny, Mrs. Tipton, to act as their private tutor. She would spend the day with the children in the apartment guiding them

through the lessons formulated by Charles. Monte first assignment was the reading and memorization of Aristotle's "Poetics." This gave Charles time to come up with a more professional lesson plan. Isabel and Annette were given children's books from the library to read and report on. As a linguist by profession, Charles had little aptitude or interest in mathematics. This area of the childrens' education was neglected almost entirely, which may explain Monte's inclination later in life to delegate the running of the "back end" of his operations to partners. He had no head for numbers and his ultimate success in business suffered as a result.

The children were not deprived in any other ways, except the lack of exposure to mathematics and to classmates. They were assigned an array of subjects to study including adventure novels like *The Count of Monte Cristo* and *The Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*, Roman and Greek history, and the early philosophers like Aesop and his fables. When there were only a few months left of the hated tutoring until a promised summer recess, Monte became inconsolable. He had been cooped up all winter and spring in the apartment with no classmates to conspire with except his sisters. Mrs. Tipton saw his suffering and took pity on him. She sent him frequently on errands so the boy could get out into the air and stretch his legs. Sometimes she would order dry goods from the grocers or a book from the library only to have Monte return the item the following day. The errands took longer and longer, eventually Monte stayed out most of certain afternoons. He came back shortly before his father arrived from work claiming that he had witnessed a crime and had to report it to the police. The details of the crime were impressive but not convincing to Mrs. Tipton who began to restrict Monte's errands to specific routes and destinations. Again, Monte was trapped and grew sullen under what amounted to permanent house arrest.

Summer arrived and the tutoring schedule was relaxed for the summer months. Monte once again took to the streets to seek adventure. He was fascinated with street fairs, carnivals and circuses, spending as much time as he could at them. He worked in the ring toss game at a neighborhood carnival for St. Anthony's church and made friends with the Catholic priests who permitted him to work in other concessions. He eventually settled as the permanent pitchman at the birch beer stand. Thinking that they would see and award his industriousness, Monte applied himself to the selling of birch beer with claims of health benefits such as "...used by the tribes of Chief Sitting Bull and Chief Pontiac as a strength tonic." Charles approved of his son's industriousness and believed the boy would learn the proper values under the priests' supervision. There were no questions asked regarding the family's religion, although with a few questions the priests might have easily guessed they were Jewish. Monte was a hard worker and that seemed to be pedigree enough. At that point Charles might have called himself agnostic since he no longer attended temple and had withdrawn from the Jewish community after taking the children out of schul.

The carnival progressed through the week providing Monte with the activity and human contact he craved. He became bolder in his claims for birch beer and was gently instructed on the virtue of humility by the priests. The cash box filled every night with pennies and nickels as Monte plied his pitch, vying for attention against the organ grinder and games of chance. He calculated that even at ten percent of the take he might come out close to his Western Union salary. It was less than half of what he normally made in tips as a messenger but it was at least walking around money, and needed it desperately. Money was freedom. It got him on the trolley where fashionable ladies and their daughters could admire his fine tailored clothes. Money bought him peppermints and chewing gum that were an appropriate

offering and conversation starter for young ladies momentarily out of their mother's eyesight. It bought him the storybooks that distracted him from the endless loneliness that hounded him, where heroes had adventures like the ones Lena promised he would have one day.

The carnival closed down late Saturday night. The priests were busy counting up the blessings they had received so they could announce the total at Mass the next day. Monte eagerly threw himself into tearing down the wood and canvas booths, clearing up the trash left from a week of heavy business. This last burst of commitment would be sure to boost his pay after a week of hard work. He knew the priests were generous and kind people. He approached the white haired monsignor and expressed his gratitude at being given the opportunity. He was thanked vigorously by the monsignor and invited to come back the following year. A long pause followed.

"May I be paid now?" Monte asked.

The old man looked puzzled, "I'm sorry, we don't pay. You see, this is a charity. It's all volunteer."

Now it was Monte's turn to look puzzled. The old man went on to explain the value of Monte's gift to the church and therefore the community. The boy heard almost none of it.

"Not even a tip?" he asked.

The priest smiled and offered only his hand in gratitude. Monte shook the man's hand and realized the past week had been the only adventure he was likely to have that summer. As Monte walked home past the shuttered shops and silent row homes to the tenements of Harvey Street, he knew whatever adventure he was going to have would come from his own invention. He knew he could capture people's attention and he knew he could weave a spell of language over them. This was his pay.

The summer winds wafted in over the Chesapeake Bay filling the grocer's bins with cherries and blue crabs. Mealy winter chestnuts and apples were picked over and eventually given to the burly draft horses who shed their dull winter coats for shiny new dapples and sleek flanks. They donned their old straw hats to ward off another summer's heat and turned from hauling coal to hauling ice.

Monte's inexhaustible energy pushed him into orbits further and further away from the family. He was allowed to resume his job at Western Union but Charles still refused to buy him a bicycle, restricting him to roller skates. In July, Monte would be fifteen and roller skates were beginning to look childish to him. The stage was set for the final battle with his father that would tear Monte from his family. As America descended into the anarchy of Prohibition, the naïve and big-hearted boy stepped into the lawless streets to begin the final lessons of his education.

In the summer of 1918, the family's three large black trunks were loaded up with everything they owned. The trunks were hoisted onto a half loaded beer wagon and hauled by two powerful, dappled gray draft horses to the Union train station.



Jane and Monte at the Copa (front)
with Jane's Mother and Friend (back)



Friend and Young Monte



Jane and Monte at the El Morocco

GENIUS OF THE CABARET WORLD



Copa was once named after Monte Proser, who has eye for picking pretty showgirls (left). He married one, ex-Copa chorine June Ball, later film star.

**MONTE PROSER HAS RUN
MORE THAN 100 CLUBS
IN 30 YEARS IN BUSINESS**

By FRANKLIN D. WALKER



FOR A LITTLE MAN, Monte Proser casts a big shadow in show business.

He's the imaginative, mighty midget who parlayed the seashore cocktail into a national institution.

He launched the popular New York Copacabana.

He earned the title of genius of the night club business.

He once turned Madison Square Garden into a gigantic dance hall.

He gave about 50 showgirls a start in Hollywood.

He made a potful of money as a Broadway musical producer.

He started the "little show" cycle in vibrant entertainment.

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DEAN MARTIN & JERRY LEWIS
in the Comedy of the Century with
THE DEWARGO SISTERS
THE MAYO BROTHERS
and a whole lot more
Copa Girls

COPACABANA
And to the Copa Lounge...
"MEET ME AT THE COPA"
30 EAST 40th ST.
NEW YORK CITY
PLACES & CLUBS

**IT'S SOMETIME...
IN KITCHEN!**
NAT "KING" COLE
GARY MORTON
JOHNANT D'ARC • DOUGLAS CLARK
The World Famous Copa Girls
COPACABANA
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