

**‘Angel's’ money launches Cocoanut Grove nightclub** by Curt Norris  
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It was one of those brief warnings, one of those tiny, vital, brilliant signals begging for attention that too often go unobserved -- a couple of lines in the Boston Post for July 30, 1942.

A “fireproof” coconut tree, the paper reported, went up in flames during the middle of a conga at the Rio Casino, a Boston nightclub on Warrenton Street.

Hatcheck girls coolly remained at their posts while other employees guided 200 guests to the street. There was no panic.

The Post story was buried, because World War II was raging, and the paper was full of discouraging news of major defeats. But the unusual fire, which should have alerted fire officials, certainly foreshadowed an event almost exactly four months later, when the catastrophic Cocoanut Grove fire claimed almost 500 lives and wrestled the headlines away from the war.

The history of the Cocoanut Grove nightclub -- it was actually a restaurant -- often was filled with controversy, but its story began innocuously enough.

In the summer of 1927, Mickey Alpert and a friend, Jacob Stavisky, went to Maine on vacation. There Alpert, a recent Boston University graduate who was preparing to follow a career in law, and Stavisky, an outstanding violinist later known as Jacques Renard, fell in with a well-dressed stranger.

In a mostly light and kidding fashion, they told him that if they had the money they would build a nightclub in Boston, their hometown, that Renard said would be “the talk of the country.”

“I’d make it a real bit of Latin America transplanted to Boston as a background for my orchestra,” Renard said of the club. “We’d have palm trees and a deep blue sky full of twinkling stars.”

The stranger, a soft-spoken man, smooth in manner and dressed in expensive sports clothes, listened intently. Finally, he asked about profits.

“Thousands,” Renard replied, but added that it would take thousands to launch the venture.

“How many thousands?” the stranger asked.

“A hundred thousand,” Renard guessed quickly.

“That’s nothing,” came the surprising response.

Alpert and Renard looked at each other in astonishment. The stranger went on. “If the money were provided, do you think you could successfully manage such a club?”

Alpert and Renard remained silent for a moment, then Alpert began, “Yes, but . . .”

“Boys,” the stranger interrupted, “I’ve bought me a nightclub.”

He reached into his hip pocket and drew out an embossed pigskin wallet crammed with bills of

large denominations.

Alpert found it difficult to accept what was happening. "We don't even know your name," he said.

"Call me Jack Berman. And while we're on the subject of names, do you know what you want to call our club?"

"Sure," Renard responded. "A name that will look good in lights, and one that folks will never forget. We'll call it Cocanut Grove."

Alpert and Renard men returned to Boston scarcely able to believe their encounter. But Jack Berman, accompanying them, was talking serious business.

"We should pick our site and get going if we are to get any of this season's business," he told them.

He handed them a substantial amount of expense money, with the comment that there was plenty more.

Alpert talked the matter over with his brother, George, who was associated with John P. Feeney, an outstanding Boston criminal lawyer. Feeney had never heard of the mysterious benefactor, but finally advised them: "Play along with him but don't get into trouble."

Renard and Mickey Alpert set about to make the Cocanut Grove a reality. They bought a block of stores, formerly used by film distributors, that bordered Broadway and Piedmont Street in the heart of the theatrical district. They turned the decoration work over to Rube Bodenhorn, who asked how much they wanted to spend. After conferring with Berman, they told him the best "would be none too good."

Gradually, the foyer and the dining room, with an impressive elevated orchestra stage overlooking a small dance floor, began to take shape. There was no bar.

Berman remained in the background, content to finance whatever Renard and Alpert suggested. Despite the fact that the original construction estimate of \$25,000 had doubled and there was no end in sight, Berman continued to pay for one luxury item after another. As opening day approached for the Cocanut Grove, he had poured nearly \$85,000 into the venture. And there was still more to do.

"We're going to shoot the works," he told Alpert and Renard. "After all, what's money for but to have fun with?"

The new club was billed as New England's most luxurious, and public interest was building to a pitch for the opening night, Oct. 27, 1927. Renard's orchestra would provide the music; Alpert would be master of ceremonies. They selected suave, portly and friendly Angelo Lippi as their maitre d'hotel. They booked leading acts and showed the opening night program to Berman for his approval.

Berman, who had always been most agreeable, stopped as his eye fell on an underlined item.

"What's all this about?" he asked, his features clouding.

"Just a way to show our appreciation," Renard answered. "We want to turn the Grove's spotlights on our 'angel' and ask for a big hand from all attending."

“Nothing doing,” Berman said, taking a pencil in his well-manicured hand and slashing out the item. “Just give me a seat in some back corner so I can see what’s going on and I’ll be satisfied.”

Renard protested, but Berman held up his hand.

“The answer is no, boys.”

And so it was.

With plenty of bills still to pay and a substantial payroll to meet after the opening, it was no time to antagonize the angel.

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