

Nightclub succeeds in gala opening by Curt Norris
The Patriot Ledger (2nd in a "N.E. Mysteries series) – ran Oct 16, 1993

[The story to date: College chums Mickey Alpert and Jacob Stevisky meet a polished stranger while on a Maine vacation. Light banter about future plans turns serious when the stranger offers to financially back a new nightclub in Boston. Money, as promised, has been no object to establishing the club, which is about to open as the "Cocoanut Grove."]

There was another sign that would have alarmed the partners had they known of it. Others, besides the general public, were starting to take an interest in the new nightclub.

The last bills on the redecorating were due Monday, Oct. 24, three days before the opening. Berman promised he would meet them at the Grove but failed to appear at the appointed time. This was unusual, for Berman was as prompt and good on his word as he was mysterious. Finally, Alpert phoned Berman's hotel. When he put the phone down and faced the others, there was a tremor in his voice.

"Berman's not there," he said. But Berman had every intention of keeping his appointment at the Grove. He was taking a shower when he heard a knock on the door of his hotel suite. He yelled for the callers to come in. As he was saying he would be right out, the bathroom door opened. Two men entered. One of them slipped a hand into a bulging pocket.

But if his mysterious past was catching up with him, Berman gave no sign. Instead, he demanded to know the reason for the intrusion. One of the men drew a badge and told Berman he was under arrest. The other man drew a picture from his pocket and compared it to Berman. He seemed satisfied at the resemblance.

"Under arrest?," Berman asked. "What for?"

"For a little matter in California involving the Julian Petroleum Corporation," came the reply.

"We've finally caught you, . . . Jack Bennett."

The suspect was taken to headquarters, where he was mugged and fingerprinted.

Renard and Alpert read the news in the afternoon papers as they left the nearly completed Cocoanut Grove. Berman had been identified as the missing Jack Bennett, the man accused of having fleeced \$100 million from eager investors. No wonder he had considered 100 grand petty cash.

Alpert and Renard were caught in the middle. It was only three days before the opening and creditors were closing in. The two partners were desperate, and Mickey again sought his brother's advice. Mickey didn't even know who owned the club. Mickey's brother continued the questioning.

"How much do you owe?"

Mickey told him.

"How much do you have on hand?"

Again Mickey replied.

“You've got a gambler's chance,” the brother answered, reaching for a pen. He underwrote a portion of the Grove's obligations and persuaded Feeney to do likewise. Others joined in, with Alpert and Renard furnishing a small amount of cash, plus the club's entertainment.

Cocoanut Grove had survived its first crisis. The doors of the club swung open as scheduled on Oct. 27.

Some of the newspapermen at the gala opening would return 15 years later to cover an event that would stun the nation.

A new era of Boston night life began when Renard swung his baton. Cafe society shared the fun with Boston bluebloods, and stars of stage, screen, and radio.

The small dance floor was crowded as couples swayed to the strains of Alpert's music. Rube Bodenhorn had certainly gone all out with the decorations, thanks to the obliging Jack Bennett, alias Berman.

Customers left the cold streets of Boston and stepped into a tropical wonderland. Imitation palm trees, with coconuts giving forth a subdued glow, shaded the old brick walls, which had become, through decorating magic, the exterior of a Spanish building. They were tipped with red tile and lighted windows. The designer had created his own heavens with twinkling electric stars.

Six people present that opening night were destined to play important roles in the new nightclub. The most sinister was gangster Charles “King” Solomon, ruler of Boston's underworld. He was faultlessly attired, and he never lost his smile. Solomon's greatest desire was to become a gentleman.

Solomon's legal advisers were present. This group included noncommittal Barnett Welansky and John P. Feeney, whose financial contributions had helped make opening night possible. The remaining three were Alpert, Renard, and Angelo Lippi.

Prosperity seemed just around the corner for the syndicate members who had stepped forward to save the Grove. As their profits mounted, the fortunes of Jack Bennett, alias Berman, dwindled.

Bennett was standing trial in Los Angeles. Evidence showed he had received more than \$100 million from various sources up to Jan. 1, 1926, through his complete control of Julian Petroleum Corp.

The court auditor stated that \$66 million of this money had been accounted for. Bennett was accused of hiding the rest of it. Bennett was found guilty and sentenced to a federal penitentiary.

Available records do not show that any attempt was made to regain the \$82,000 spent to build Cocoanut Grove. After all, one reporter noted, it wasn't even hay. A more realistic reason may be that the country was undergoing financial agonies. The stock market crash had come, leaving its mark on almost every American home and destroying paper profits. These problems extended to Cocoanut Grove.

The syndicate had kept its promise not to bolster lagging sales through the sale of illegal liquor. By 1931, not even Renard's torrid music, Lippi's good food, or Mickey's engaging banter, could halt the flow of red ink on the club's ledgers.

Renard's salary was cut to what he furiously called a pittance. He left to go over to the Mayflower, which offered serious competition to the Grove.

A worried George Alpert commiserated with the rest of the syndicate. The Grove seemed to jinx all involved in its affairs. He sent out word that this super luxury club could be bought, and cheaply.

There were no takers. Well, he let it be known, he might just tear the place to pieces and sell the expensive fittings for junk. Then Barnett Welansky, Solomon's legal front, stepped forward.

"I have a customer," the lawyer announced. "What's your price?"

When the deal was completed, Welansky bought Coconut Grove for a mere 10 cents on each original investment dollar. He paid \$10,000 and the club slid into new ownership.

Copyright *The Patriot Ledger* October 16, 1993