

Grove prospers, but problems mount for King Solomon by Curt Norris
For *The Patriot Ledger* (3rd in a N.E. Mysteries series) - Oct. 23, 1993

[The story so far: Hard economic times befall the Coconut Grove. The original partnership is dissolved, and an underworld character, King Solomon, purchases the Boston nightclub, paying only 10 cents on the dollar.]

Mickey Alpert remained as the master of ceremonies. Angelo Lippi continued as maitre d'hotel, but was also appointed president and treasurer -- or so the records would have us believe.

By the time the public became aware that Charles ``King" Solomon now owned the Coconut Grove, the crime king of New England had almost become a gentleman.

He was born in Russia, the son of Joseph and Sarah Blum Solomon, and grew up on the proper side of the Salem, Mass., waterfront. He went in with his pawnbroker uncle to learn that trade, but soon edged himself into control of a loan shark company and slithered into the bail bond business.

In addition to the Coconut Grove, Solomon owned three Boston theaters; a \$25,000 beauty parlor; the Shore Gardens restaurant; the Stella di Italia Restaurant in Nantasket; restaurants in Lynn, Salem and Haverhill; three hotels in New York City; an aluminum factory in Brooklyn; a theater in Buffalo; and a nightclub in Montreal.

With others, Solomon built up a worldwide bootlegging syndicate that included a fleet of more than 25 tramp steamers. The boats roamed the world picking up liquor to be rushed later in syndicate-owned speedboats to U.S. shores, where it was loaded into syndicate trucks for transportation to syndicate warehouses.

King Solomon, who was a charter member of Murder Incorporated in New York and had a police record extending back to larceny charges in 1916, was also deep into the narcotics and lottery rackets, and in prostitution with Lucky Luciano and others. His activities were well-known to the police, but he was careful. He was nicknamed ``King" by underworld cohorts because of his uncanny ability to befuddle the authorities while enlarging his illegal enterprises.

At the time he gained control of the Coconut Grove, his wife managed the Wampanoag Motor Coach Tavern in Taunton, Mass. Police were later to term the tavern ``a notorious hideaway of racketeering."

Solomon was riding high as big names once again adorned the Grove's marquee and crowds poured through the single revolving door at the entrance -- the same door later to be known as the ``Portal of Death."

The King got a big kick out of mingling with the celebrities he paid to appear at the club. Among the stars who appeared at the Grove was Texas Guinan, who called Solomon ``Old Slobby Puss," and Solomon loved it.

Helen Morgan, who had starred in "Show Boat," told the Grove's customers about her man Bill. Sally Rand teased the men into running up large bills, and Belle Baker left the lipstick imprint of many a kiss on the bald pates of appreciative customers.

Solomon also entertained his gangster friends at the Grove, but he was careful to guard its reputation. Wild parties were always held in the privacy of rooms in one of his Boston hotels. Some visitors to the Grove got no farther than Solomon's private offices in the foyer when they came seeking instructions or advice. There he also settled disputes among the lower levels of gangdom, averting gang warfare that might have caused authorities to ask troublesome questions.

But his reign was nearing an end.

On December 30, 1932, bandits robbed the paymaster of Arkright Mills in Fall River of \$21,000 in cash. According to underworld gossip at the time, one of the robbers turned the money over to Solomon for fencing, what we now call "laundering." When the time came for an accounting, Solomon claimed he had received only \$11,000. The robbers, unimpressed by his reputation, threatened him. Solomon laughed at the threat.

The Cocoonut Grove continued at its profitable tempo even as new problems arose for its owner. The Department of Internal Revenue alleged that Solomon was the mastermind behind the \$14 million fleet running whiskey to the United States from Belize and St. Pierre, and he was ordered to appear before a New York grand jury.

Solomon denied involvement and disappeared before a warrant could be served. He reappeared Jan. 7, 1933, and was arraigned before U.S. Commissioner Edwin C. Jenney.

After being released on a \$5,000 bail bond he obtained from his own bail-bond company, he told reporters that the charges against him were false and had been instigated by enemies. Then he made a remark that startled his lawyers and caused unrest in certain quarters. He said he wasn't worried because he had friends in high places. The lawyers quickly shut him up.

At 3 a.m. on Tuesday, Jan. 24, 1933, partying at the Cocoonut Grove was at its height. But Solomon was restless and bored. "Let's go," he suggested to the others around him, "and see what Tommy Maren has on at his Cotton Club."

The others agreed and they took a taxi to the Cotton Club, on Tremont Street near Massachusetts Avenue, about a mile beyond the theater district. It was 3:30 a.m. when the group walked in and checked their hats. Solomon paused for a moment, looking for Maren, who was a friend. He did not appear, but headwaiter Charles Harris stepped forward.

"Well, Mr. Solomon," he is reported to have said, "we don't often have the pleasure of seeing you in any club but your own."

Copyright *The Patriot Ledger* October 23, 1993