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The Beautiful and the Wasted

For social drinkers, the party never ends—until they check into rehab. **By Karen Moline**

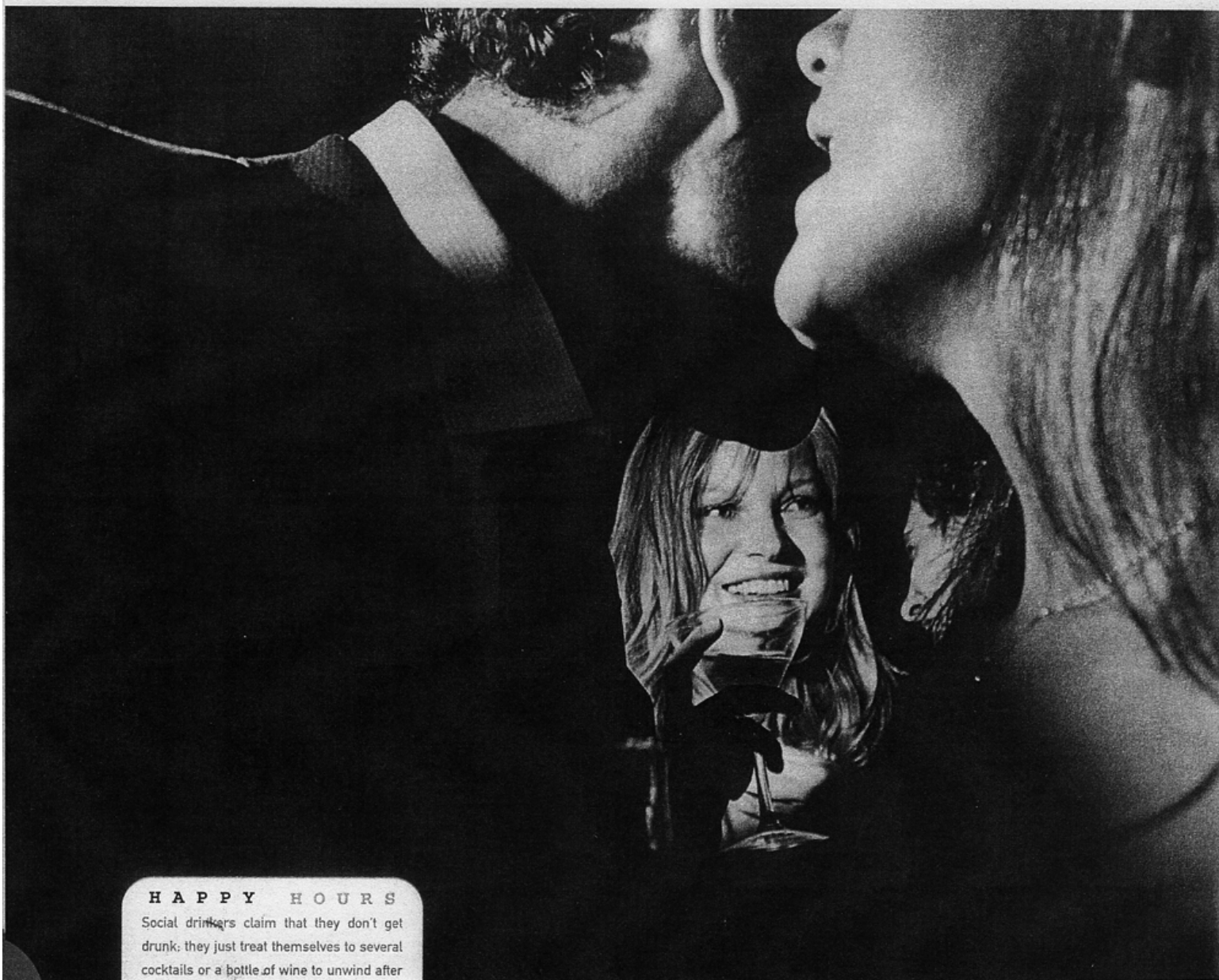
You've seen her at glamorous parties, in chic night spots and splashed across the society pages, cocktail in hand as she throws her head back in laughter, teeth gleaming. She's the epitome of health, glamour and success. She's who you want to be.

Until you realize the vodka tonic she's holding is one of many—too many—to come. But a golden girl like her couldn't be an alcoholic—don't be ridiculous. She's simply a Social Drinker. Out being Social. Out being a Drinker.

Let's call her a Slinker.

Slinkers don't have a drink; Slinkers have a cocktail. Slinkers don't get drunk; they just unwind after a stressful day of riding the NASDAQ roller-coaster or fighting over the last pair of Manolos at a sample sale. Slinkers always manage to get to work—okay, maybe a little late—and to look really busy. You may be able to make a Slinker admit she shouldn't have had that fifth cosmo, but never mind, she can handle it. She'll sip nothing but Evian for a few days, and then she's back to Slinking. Life is much too short to be a teetotaling bore, right?

Today the number of Slinkers is reaching significant levels—there are four times as many people considered problem drinkers as there are alcoholics



HAPPY HOURS

Social drinkers claim that they don't get drunk; they just treat themselves to several cocktails or a bottle of wine to unwind after



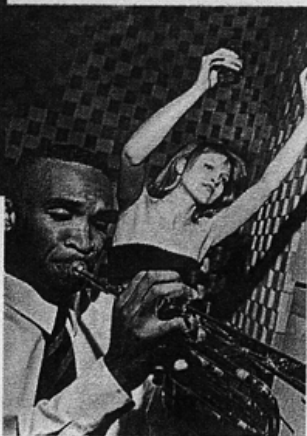
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ing their desire for another gimlet. Slinkers have perfected posing as bon vivants, quick to expound on the charms of the whole ritual: the martinis being shaken, the smoothness of an olive on the tongue and the buzz that hits after a few jiggers of cold gin. They'll insist they can stop whenever they want (and many of them can). What Slinkers either don't realize or don't want to admit is that they could be heading toward a serious problem. According to literature from Alcoholics Anonymous, "the one thing all alcoholics seem to have in common is that, as time passes, the drinking gets worse." Some drinkers start out slowly, progressing over decades to uncontrolled imbibing. Others drink daily from the start, while still another subset can abstain for months or even years before bingeing. "During my 18 years in the music industry, everyone claimed to be just a social drinker," says producer Trisha Wexler. "After 18 years of social drinking, there were more people than I care to count who found themselves 'socially drinking' coffee at A.A. or Betty Ford."

Sasha (names have been changed) is married to a real-estate mogul. In the last few months, she has seen her dermatologist and plastic surgeon more than her husband. Her skin is shot, and not all the peels and facelifts in the world will bring back her youthful glow. But at the parties she goes to, everyone is a little drunk, so they don't really notice. Too bad Sasha gets so bombed that she can't remember how she turns vicious after the fifth rye and ginger ("He's a pig in bed," she screams to one of her best friends, "and I know you screwed him, so get the hell out of my

face!"). She's starting to wonder why she's getting the cold shoulder from some of the social contacts she's cultivated so assiduously over the years.

Pauline, a much vaunted New York painter and party girl, is always phoning friends the morning after a martini marathon and moaning, "I went out with so-and-so last night—you know what he's like—and he made me drink too much. I know I shouldn't, but oh well, what can you do?" To her credit, after getting through her condolence calls, she paints fanatically all day—or so she says. What she doesn't tell her friends is that, thanks to the



effects of all the martinis on her body, her gynecologist thinks it will be next to impossible for her to get pregnant.

Pauline is one of many casualties in today's art scene, which is probably responsible for creating more Slinkers than masterpieces. Entertainment, media and finance are other fields that seem to attract and foster Slinkers. "In my 10 years as an editor at Condé Nast, I saw writers after hours and only realized then how many of them had massive drinking problems," says Katharine Russell Rich, author of *The Red Devil*, a memoir about her breast cancer. "What made me sad was seeing how they could produce even when drunk—I couldn't help wondering how much more they would write, and how much better it would be, if they didn't drink so much."

in America, according to statistics from Moderation Management. (Seven percent of the population is either an alcoholic or is developing alcoholism.) While alcoholism is a chronic, progressive disease characterized by four symptoms—the craving for alcohol, an inability to limit one's intake, physical dependence and increasing tolerance—problem drinking is more fuzzily defined. It involves any kind of consumption that disrupts a person's life (causing problems with friends or family, for example, or poor performance at the office).

Since alcohol's effects vary from individual to individual, even drinking in moderation can have negative results. According to the National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information, drinking in moderation means having no more than one drink a day for women, two drinks a day for men. (Twelve ounces of beer, five ounces of wine or one-and-a-half ounces of spirits equal a drink.) The costs of a couple of nightly cocktails can be high, however: In a recent study, Jeffrey Wiese, medical professor at the University of California, concluded that 87 percent of all drinking-related lost productivity and absenteeism in the workplace is caused by light-to-moderate drinkers—not by alcoholics.

For the uninitiated, Slinkers can be hard to spot. They're adept at mask-

"After years of social drinking, more people than I care to count ended up 'socially drinking' coffee at A.A. or Betty Ford," says a music producer.

The Beautiful and the Wasted



Snapshots from the life of a social drinker: Her nights are filled with parties, and her days with hangovers.

Try telling a Slinker that she's teetering on the brink of alcoholism, and she'll laugh it off. It's far easier to laugh than to admit that she's treading that fine line between social drinking and full-blown alcoholism. Too often, as their liquor intake progresses, the Slinkers' definition of "moderate" changes. They progress from occasional benders to regular ones. They start drinking at lunchtime or on weekday evenings, when they used to drink only water at the gym. They stop seeing friends who are teetotalers, because these pals always look so concerned and drop hints about A.A. They make certain their calendar is jammed with busy nights, which provide the excuse for more cocktails. Their need for alcohol becomes just that: a physiological and psychological need. Instead of the Slinker controlling the drinking, the drinking controls the Slinker.

Unlike other forms of substance abuse, Slinking is countenanced in the most polite and professional circles. "Too much drinking is different from taking too many drugs, because in our society it's sanctioned behavior," explains Mindy Fullilove MD, an addiction psychiatrist at Columbia Presbyterian Hospital in New York. "When you drink too much, you're not making a conscious choice to engage in deviant behavior."

When any kind of stress hits, it's socially acceptable—even expected—to seek comfort in a Manhattan or two, or five. "The problem of when you cross the line from social drinking to alcoholism is so gray that it's hard to define," explains therapist David Burr, a Hamptons-based interventionist well known for taking on difficult cases. "Dealing with problem drinking is anything but a science. This is what we hear all the time: 'What a day I had—I sure could use a drink.' If this person said, 'What a day I had—I sure could use a shot of heroin,' the reaction would be very different."

Unless a spouse, family member, friend or business associate gets involved, most Slinkers have no incentive to stop, so they don't. They've figured out what they need to possess to survive. "If you have three things: wealth, intelligence and physical stamina—in other words, if your liver and kidneys aren't shot yet—it's [easy to hide]," Burr says. "Even if you lose one of these things, you can usually cover yourself with the other two."

Take Thomas, a banker who took early retirement and bought a big house in the country, which his wife decorated to the hilt. He was regarded as a huge success, but once he stepped away from his regular workaday routine, his "normal" social drinking was revealed to be not so normal. Instead of sipping Scotch in his office, he began filling the Baccarat decanter on his bedside table with vodka. It turned out, too, that rather than leaving his job voluntarily, he'd been forced out by a board weary of his boozily botching megamergers. When his wife ran off with another man, Thomas responded by going on a megabender, got arrested for public

drunkenness and was promptly tossed into rehab.

Like his peers, Thomas never would confess that he was dependent on alcohol, and until that last blowout, he also was careful never to be seen drunk. Most people in his circle were drinking just as much, if not more. If he'd been in a different environment, he or his friends might have noticed he'd left Slinking behind and had ended up in a chronically drunk state.

"You know you're crossing the line into full-blown alcoholism when you're not being honest with yourself or anyone else, drinking more than you intend to on a consistent basis and not coping with the problems in your social life, professional life, family life and health," says Vincent Casolaro, co-founder and Clinical Director of Inter-Care in New York City, a rehab center affiliated with the Betty Ford Clinic and its methodology.

If you or someone you know has a drinking problem, there are a few options for help: support groups, treatment centers and addiction psychiatrists. The best-known group is Alcoholics Anonymous (800.266.4410, www.aa.org), which sponsors both open (in which anyone can walk in) and closed (in which only alcoholics are welcome) meetings worldwide. However, A.A.'s emphasis on religion is a deterrent to some people; in that case, try LifeRing Secular Recovery (510.763.0779, www.unhooked.com), an international 12-step organization that is strictly non-religious. For names of inpatient or outpatient treatment facilities, call the Alcohol Treatment Referral Service (800.ALCOHOL) or the National Drug and Alcohol Treatment Referral Service (800.662.HELP) to find places in your area. Finally, if you'd prefer working one-on-one with a licensed specialist, you can call the American Society of Addiction Medicine (301.656.3920) for a list of qualified doctors in your state.

Loved ones who serve as silent accomplices to Slinkers need to learn to stop picking up the pieces. "If someone you love gets drunk, throws up, passes out, you can feel bad that this person passed out," Fullilove says. "You can clean up after them once. But chronically? Absolutely not. You need to remain a loving person, but you must also get out of the way of the consequences. Otherwise, chances are slim that the drinking will stop."

Of course, Slinkers don't drink because they hope to have a future as alcoholics—they drink for the immediate payoff: that carefree haze of camaraderie and ease. "The romance with altered consciousness will never die down," says Carol Weiss MD, Assistant Professor of Psychology and Public Health at the Weill Medical College of Cornell University. "It's a very desirable state and has been since recorded history began."

Sooner or later, though, the fun will have to stop, and the Slinker will have to admit the party's over...one would hope long before the water in the Baccarat decanter has been replaced with vodka. ●