

The Old House at Home

by Joseph Mitchell

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McSorley's occupies the ground floor of a red-brick tenement at 15 Seventh Street, just off Cooper Square, where the Bowery ends. It was opened in 1854 and is the oldest saloon in New York City. In eighty-eight years it has had four owners—an Irish immigrant, his son, a retired policeman, and his daughter—and all of them have been opposed to change. It



is equipped with electricity, but the bar is stubbornly illuminated with a pair of gas lamps, which flicker fitfully and throw shadows on the low, cobwebby ceiling each time someone opens the street door. There is no cash register. Coins are dropped in soup bowls—one for nickels, one for dimes, one for quarters, and one for

halves—and bills are kept in a rosewood cashbox. It is a drowsy place; the bartenders never make a needless move, the customers nurse their mugs of ale, and the three clocks on the walls have not been in agreement for many years. The clientele is motley. It includes mechanics from the many garages in the neighborhood, salesmen from the restaurant-supply houses on Cooper Square, truck-drivers from Wanamaker's, internes from Bellevue, students from Cooper Union, and clerks from the row of second-hand bookshops just north of Astor Place. The backbone of the clientele, however, is a rapidly thinning group of crusty old men, predominantly Irish, who have been drinking

there since they were youths and now have a proprietary feeling about the place. Some of them have tiny pensions, and are alone in the world; they sleep in Bowery hotels and spend practically all their waking hours in McSorley's. A few of these veterans clearly remember John McSorley, the founder, who died in 1910 at the age of eighty-seven. They refer to him as Old John, and they like to sit in rickety armchairs around the big belly stove which heats the place, gnaw on the stems of their pipes, and talk about him.

Old John was quirky. He was normally affable but was subject to spells of unaccountable surliness during which he would refuse to answer when spoken to. He went bald in early manhood and began wearing scraggly, patriarchal sideburns before he was forty. Many photographs of him are in existence, and it is obvious that he had a lot of unassumed dignity. He patterned his saloon after a public house he had known in his hometown in Ireland—Omagh, in County Tyrone—and originally called it the Old House at Home; around 1908 the signboard blew down, and when he ordered a new one he changed the name to McSorley's Old Ale House. That is still the official name; customers never have called it anything but McSorley's. Old John believed it impossible for men to drink with tranquillity in the presence of women; there is a fine back room in the saloon, but for many years a sign was nailed on the street door, saying, "NOTICE. NO BACK ROOM IN HERE FOR LADIES." In McSorley's entire history, in fact, the only woman customer ever willingly admitted was an addled old peddler called Mother Fresh-Roasted, who claimed her husband died from the bite of a lizard in Cuba during the Spanish-American War and who went from saloon to saloon on the lower East Side for a couple of generations hawking peanuts, which she carried in her apron. On warm days, Old John would sell her an ale, and her esteem for him was such that she embroidered him a little American flag and gave it to him one Fourth of July; he had it framed and placed it on the wall above his brass-bound ale pump, and it is still there. When other women came in, Old John would hurry forward, make a bow, and say, "Madam, I'm sorry, but we don't serve ladies." If a woman insisted, Old John would take her by the elbow, head her toward the door, and say,

“Madam, please don’t provoke me. Make haste and get yourself off the premises, or I’ll be obliged to forget you’re a lady.” This technique, pretty much word for word, is still in use.

In his time, Old John catered to the Irish and German workingmen—carpenters, tanners, bricklayers, slaughter-house butchers, teamsters, and brewers—who populated the Seventh Street neighborhood, selling ale in pewter mugs at five cents a mug and putting out a free lunch inflexibly consisting of soda crackers, raw onions, and cheese; present-day customers are wont to complain that some of the cheese Old John laid out on opening night in 1854 is still there. Adjacent to the free lunch he kept a quart crock of tobacco and a rack of clay and corncob pipes—the purchase of an ale entitled a man to a smoke on the house; the rack still holds a few of the communal pipes. Old John was thrifty and was able to buy the tenement—it is five stories high and holds eight families—about ten years after he opened the saloon in it. He distrusted banks and always kept his money in a cast-iron safe; it still stands in the back room, but its doors are loose on their hinges and there is nothing in it but an accumulation of expired saloon licenses and several McSorley heirlooms, including Old John’s straight razor. He lived with his family in a flat directly over the saloon and got up every morning at five and took a long walk before breakfast, no matter what the weather. He unlocked the saloon at seven, swept it out himself, and spread sawdust on the floor. Until he became too feeble to manage a racing sulky, he always kept a horse and a nanny goat in a stable around the corner on St. Mark’s Place. He kept both animals in the same stall, believing, like many horse-lovers, that horses should have company at night. During the lull in the afternoon a stablehand would lead the horse around to a hitching block in front of the saloon, and Old John, wearing his bar apron, would stand on the curb and groom the animal. A customer who wanted service would tap on the window and Old John would drop his currycomb, step inside, draw an ale, and return at once to the horse. On Sundays he entered sulky races on uptown highways.

From the time he was twenty until he was fifty-five, Old John drank steadily, but throughout the last thirty-two years of

his life he did not take a drop, saying, "I've had my share." Except for a few experimental months in 1905 or 1906, no spirits ever have been sold in McSorley's; Old John maintained that the man never lived who needed a stronger drink than a mug of ale warmed on the hob of a stove. He was a big eater. Customarily, just before locking up for the night, he would grill himself a three-pound T-bone, placing it on a coal shovel and holding it over a bed of oak coals in the back-room fireplace. He liked to fit a whole onion into the hollowed-out heel of a loaf of French bread and eat it as if it were an apple. He had an extraordinary appetite for onions, the stronger the better, and said that "Good ale, raw onions, and no ladies" was the motto of his saloon. About once a month during the winter he presided over an on-the-house beefsteak party in the back room, and late in life he was president of an organization of gluttons called the Honorable John McSorley Pickle, Beefsteak, Baseball Nine, and Chowder Club, which held hot-rock clambakes in a picnic grove on North Brother Island in the East River. On the walls are a number of photographs taken at outings of the club, and in most of them the members are squatting around kegs of ale; except for the president, they all have drunken, slack-mouthed grins and their eyes look dazed. Old John had a bull-frog bass and enjoyed harmonizing with a choir of drunks. His favorite songs were "Muldoon, the Solid Man," "Swim Out, You're Over Your Head," "Maggie Murphy's Home," and "Since the Soup House Moved Away." These songs were by Harrigan and Hart, who were then called "the Gilbert and Sullivan of the U.S.A." He had great respect for them and was pleased exceedingly when, in 1882, they made his saloon the scene of one of their slum comedies; it was called "McSorley's Inflation."



Although by no means a handshaker, Old John knew many prominent men. One of his closest friends was Peter Cooper, president of the North American Telegraph Company and founder of Cooper Union, which is a half-block west of the saloon. Mr. Cooper, in his declining years, spent so many afternoons in the back room philosophizing with the workingmen that he was given a chair of his own; it was equipped with an inflated rubber cushion. (The chair is still there; each April 4th for a number of years after Mr. Cooper's death, on April 4, 1883, it was draped with black cloth.) Also, like other steadfast customers, Mr. Cooper had a pewter mug on which his name had been engraved with an icepick. He gave the saloon a life-sized portrait of himself, which hangs over the mantel in the back room. It is an appropriate decoration, because, since the beginning of prohibition, McSorley's has been the official saloon of Cooper Union students. Sometimes a sentimental student will stand beneath the portrait and drink a toast to Mr. Cooper.

Old John had a remarkable passion for memorabilia. For years he saved the wishbones of Thanksgiving and Christmas turkeys and strung them on a rod connecting the pair of gas lamps over the bar; the dusty bones are invariably the first thing a new customer gets inquisitive about. Not long ago, a Johnny-come-lately annoyed one of the bartenders by remarking,

“Maybe the old boy believed in voodoo.” Old John decorated the partition between barroom and back room with banquet menus, autographs, starfish shells, theatre programs, political posters, and worn-down shoes taken off the hoofs of various race and brewery horses. Above the entrance to the back room he hung a shillelagh and a sign: “BE GOOD OR BEGONE.” On one wall of the barroom he placed portraits of horses, steamboats, Tammany bosses, jockeys, actors, singers, and statesmen. Around 1902 he put up a heavy oak frame containing excellent portraits of Lincoln, Garfield, and McKinley, and to the frame he attached a brass title tag reading, “THEY ASSASSINATED THESE GOOD MEN THE SKULKING DOGS.” On the same wall he hung framed front pages of old newspapers; one, from the *London Times* for June 22, 1815, has in its lower right-hand corner a single paragraph on the beginning of the battle of Waterloo, and another, from the *New York Herald* of April 15, 1865, has a one-column story on the shooting of Lincoln. He blanketed another wall with lithographs and steel engravings. One depicts Garfield’s deathbed. Another is entitled “The Great Fight.” It was between Tom Hyer and Yankee Sullivan, both bareknuckled, at Still Pond Heights, Maryland, in 1849. It was won by Hyer in sixteen rounds, and the prize was \$10,000. The judges wore top hats. The title tag on another engraving reads, “Rescue of Colonel Thomas J. Kelly and Captain Timothy Deacy by Members of the Irish Revolutionary Brotherhood from the English Government at Manchester, England, September 18, 1867.” A copy of the Emancipation Proclamation is on this wall; so, inevitably, is a facsimile of Lincoln’s saloon license. An engraving of Washington and his generals hangs next to an engraving of a session of the Great Parliament of Ireland. Eventually Old John covered practically every square inch of wall space between wainscot and ceiling with pictures and souvenirs. They are still in good condition, although spiders have strung webs across many of them. New customers get up on chairs and spend hours studying them.

Although Old John did not consider himself retired until just a few years before he died, he gave up day-in-and-day-out duty back of the bar around 1890 and made his son, William, head bartender. Bill McSorley was the kind of person who

minds his own business vigorously. He inherited every bit of his father's surliness and not much of his affability. The father was by no means a lush, but the son carried temperance to an extreme; he drank nothing but tap water and tea, and bragged about it. He did dip a little snuff. He was so solemn that before he was thirty several customers had settled into the habit of calling him Old Bill. He worshipped his father, but no one was aware of the profundity of his worship until Old John died. After the funeral, Bill locked the saloon, went upstairs to the family flat, pulled the shutters to, and did not come out for almost a week. Finally, on a Sunday morning, gaunt and silent, he came downstairs with a hammer and a screwdriver and spent the day painstakingly securing his father's pictures and souvenirs to the walls; they had been hung hit or miss on wires, and customers had a habit of taking them down. Subsequently he commissioned a Cooper Union art teacher to make a small painting of Old John from a photograph. Bill placed it on the wall back of the bar and thereafter kept a hooded electric light burning above it, a pious custom that is still observed.

Throughout his life Bill's principal concern was to keep McSorley's exactly as it had been in his father's time. When anything had to be changed or repaired, it appeared to pain him physically. For twenty years the bar had a deepening sag. A carpenter warned him repeatedly that it was about to collapse; finally, in 1933, he told the carpenter to go ahead and prop it up. While the work was in progress he sat at a table in the back room with his head in his hands and got so upset he could not eat for several days. In the same year the smoke- and cobweb-encrusted paint on the ceiling began to flake off and float to the floor. After customers complained that they were afraid the flakes they found in their ale might strangle them to death, he grudgingly had the ceiling repainted. In 1925 he had to switch to earthenware mugs; most of the pewter ones had been stolen by souvenir hunters. In the same year a coin-box telephone, which he would never answer himself, was installed in the back room. These were about the only major changes he ever allowed. Occasionally one of the pictures his father had hung would fall off the wall and the glass would break, and he would fill in the gap. His contributions include a set of portraits of the

wives of Presidents through the first Mrs. Woodrow Wilson, a poster of Barney Oldfield in a red racing car, and a poem called "The Man Behind the Bar." He knew this poem by heart and particularly liked the last verse:

*When St. Peter sees him coming he will leave the gates ajar,
For he knows he's had his hell on earth, has the man behind
the bar.*

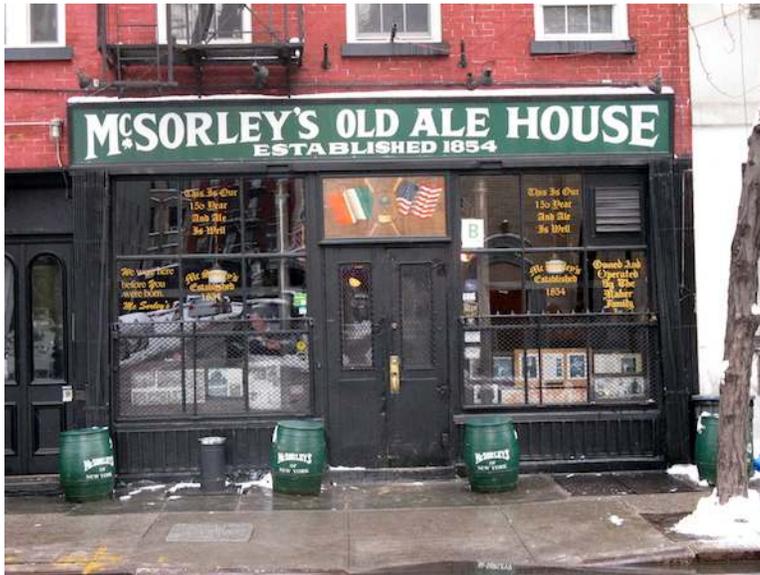


As a businessman, Bill was anachronous; he hated banks, cash registers, bookkeeping, and salesmen. If the saloon became crowded, he would close up early, saying, "I'm getting too confounded much trade in here." Agents for the brewery from which he bought his ale often tried to get him to open a checking account; he stubbornly continued to pay his ale bills with currency, largely silver. He would count out the money four or five times and hand it to the driver in a paper bag. Bill was an able bartender. He understood ale; he knew how to draw it and how to keep it, and his bar pipes were always clean. In warm weather he made a practice of chilling the mugs in a tub of ice; even though a customer nursed an ale a long time, the chilled earthenware mug kept it cool. Except during prohibition, the rich, wax-colored ale sold in McSorley's always has come from the Fidelio Brewery on First Avenue; the brewery was founded two years before the saloon. In 1934, Bill

sold this brewery the right to call its ale McSorley's Cream Stock and gave it permission to use Old John's picture on the label; around the picture is the legend "As brewed for McSorley's Old Ale House." During prohibition McSorley's ale was produced mysteriously in rows of barrels and washtubs in the cellar by a retired brewer named Barney Kelly, who would come down three times a week from his home in the Bronx. On these days the smell of malt and wet hops would be strong in the place. Kelly's product was raw and extraordinarily emphatic, and Bill made a practice of weakening it with near beer. In fact, throughout prohibition Bill referred to his ale as near beer, a euphemism which greatly amused the customers. One night a policeman who knew Bill stuck his head in the door and said, "I seen a old man up at the corner wrestling with a truck horse. I asked him what he'd been drinking and he said, 'Near beer in McSorley's.'" The prohibition ale cost fifteen cents, or two mugs for a quarter. Ale now costs a dime a mug.

Bill was big and thick-shouldered, but he did not look strong; he had a shambling walk and a haggard face and always appeared to be convalescing from something. He wore rusty-black suits and black bow ties; his shirts, however, were surprisingly fancy—they were silk, with candy stripes. He was nearsighted, the saloon was always dimly lit, and his most rigid conviction was that drink should not be sold to minors; consequently he would sometimes peer across the bar at a small-sized adult and say, "Won't sell you nothing, bud. Get along home, where you belong." Once he stared for a long time at a corner of the saloon and suddenly shouted, "Take your foot off that table!" Evidently he had been staring at a shadow; no one was sitting in the corner. Bill was tyrannical. Reading a newspaper, he would completely disregard a line of customers waiting to be served. If a man became impatient and demanded a drink, Bill would look up angrily and shout obscene remarks at him in a high, nasal voice. Such treatment did not annoy customers but made them snicker; they thought he was funny. In fact, despite Bill's bad disposition, many customers were fond of him. They had known him since they were young men together and had grown accustomed to his quirks. They even took a wry sort of pride in him, and when they said he was the

gloomiest, or the stingiest, man in the Western Hemisphere there was boastfulness in their voices; the more eccentric he became, the more they respected him. Sometimes, for the benefit of a newcomer, one of these customers would show Bill off, shouting, "Hey, Bill, lend me fifty dollars!" or "Hey, Bill, there ain't no pockets in a shroud!" Such remarks usually provoked an outburst of gamy epithets. Then the customer would turn proudly to the newcomer and say, "See?" When prohibition came, Bill simply disregarded it. He ran wide open. He did not have a peephole door, nor did he pay protection, but McSorley's was never raided; the fact that it was patronized by a number of Tammany politicians and minor police officials probably gave it immunity.



Bill never had a fixed closing hour but locked up as soon as he began to feel sleepy, which was usually around ten o'clock. Just before closing he would summon everybody to the bar and buy a round. This had been his father's custom and he faithfully carried it on, even though it seemed to hurt him to do so. If the customers were slow about finishing the final drink, he would cough fretfully once or twice, then drum on the bar with both fists and say, "Now, see here, gents! I'm under no obligoddamnation to stand here all night while you hold on to them drinks." Whenever Bill completely lost his temper he

would jump up and down and moan piteously. One night in the winter of 1924 a feminist from Greenwich Village put on trousers, a man's topcoat, and a cap, stuck a cigar in her mouth, and entered McSorley's. She bought an ale, drank it, removed her cap, and shook her long hair down on her shoulders. Then she called Bill a male chauvinist, yelled something about the equality of the sexes, and ran out. When Bill realized he had sold a drink to a woman, he let out a cross between a moan and a bellow and began to jump up and down. "She was a woman!" he yelled. "She was a goddamn woman!"

Bill was deaf, or pretended to be; even so, ordinary noises seemed to bother him unduly. The method he devised to keep the saloon tranquil was characteristic of him. He bought a fire-alarm gong similar to those used in schools and factories and screwed it to the seven-foot-tall icebox behind the bar. If someone started a song, or if the old men sitting around the stove began to yell at each other, he would shuffle over to the gong and give the rope a series of savage jerks. The gong is there yet and is customarily sounded at a quarter to midnight as a warning that closing time is imminent; the customers grab their ears when it goes off. Bill was consistent in his aversion to noise; he didn't even like the sound of his own voice. He was able to go for days without speaking, answering all questions with a snort or a grunt. A man who drank in McSorley's steadily for sixteen years once said that in that time Bill spoke exactly four intelligible words to him. They were "Curiosity killed the cat." The man had politely asked Bill to tell him the history of a pair of rusty convict shackles on the wall. He learned later that a customer who had fought in the Civil War had brought them back from a Confederate prison in Andersonville, Georgia, and had given them to Old John as a souvenir.

Bill would sometimes take an inexplicable liking to a customer. Around 1911 a number of painters began hanging out in McSorley's. Among them were John Sloan, George Luks, Glenn O. Coleman, and Stuart Davis. They were all good painters, they didn't put on airs, and the workingmen in the saloon accepted them as equals. One night, Hippolyte Havel,

the anarchist, came in with the painters. Havel was a long-haired, myopic, gentle-mannered Czech whose speeches often got him in trouble with the police. Even Bill was curious about him. "What's that crazy-looking fellow do for a living?" he asked one of the painters. Playing safe, the painter said Havel was a politician, more or less. Havel liked the place and became a steady customer. Most nights after making a fiery speech in Union Square, he would hurry down to McSorley's. To the amazement of the old-timers, a strong friendship grew up between him and Bill, who was a Tammany Democrat and an utter reactionary; no one was ever able to figure out the basis of the friendship. Bill called the anarchist Hippo and would let him have credit up to two dollars; other customers were not allowed to charge so much as a nickel cigar. Bill had an extremely vague idea about Havel's politics. Charles Francis Murphy, the Tammany boss, occasionally dropped in, and once Bill told Havel he was going to speak a good word to the boss for him. "Maybe he'll put you in line for something," Bill said. The anarchist, who thought no man was as foul as a Tammany boss, smiled and thanked him. A police captain once took it upon himself to warn Bill against Havel. "You better keep your eyes on that long-haired nut," he said. "Why?" asked Bill. The question annoyed the police captain. "Hell fire, man," he said, "Havel's an anarchist! He's in favor of blowing up every bank in the country." "So am I," said Bill. Bill's friendship for Havel was extraordinary in every way. As a rule, he reserved his kindness for cats. He owned as many as eighteen at once and they had the run of the saloon. He fed them on bull livers put through a sausage grinder and they became enormous. When it came time to feed them, he would leave the bar, no matter how brisk business was, and bang on the bottom of a tin pan; the fat cats would come loping up, like leopards, from all corners of the saloon.

Bill had been married but was childless, and he used to say, "When I go, this place goes with me." In March, 1936, however, he changed his mind—why, no one knows—and, to the surprise of the veteran customers, sold both saloon and tenement to Daniel O'Connell, an old policeman, who, since 1900, had spent most of his leisure at a table in the back room.

O'Connell retired from the Department two days before he purchased the saloon. He was the kind of man of whom people say, "If he can't speak a good word about you, he won't speak a bad one." He was almost as proud of the saloon's traditions as Bill and willingly promised he would make no changes; that was one of the conditions of the sale. Almost from the day Bill sold out, his health began to fail. He took a room in the house of a relative in Queens. Sometimes, in the afternoon, if the weather was good, he would shuffle into the bar, a sallow, disenchanted old man, and sit in the Peter Cooper chair with his knotty hands limp in his lap. For hours he would sit and stare at the painting of Old John. The customers were sure he was getting ready to die, but when he came in they would say, "You looking chipper today, Billy boy," or something like that. He seemed grateful for such remarks. He rarely spoke, but once he turned to a man he had known for forty years and said, "Times have changed, McNally." "You said it, Bill," McNally replied. Then, as if afraid he had been sentimental, Bill coughed, spat, and said, irrelevantly, "The bread you get these days, it ain't fit to feed a dog." On the night of September 21, 1938, barely thirty-one months after he quit drawing ale, he died in his sleep. As close as his friends could figure it, his age was seventy-six.

The retired policeman made a gentle saloonkeeper. Unlike Bill, he would never throw a quarrelsome drunk into the street but would try to sober him up with coffee or soup. "If a man gets crazy on stuff I sold him, I can't kick him out," he said one day. "That would be evading my responsibility." He was proprietor for less than four years. He died in December, 1939, and left the property to a daughter, Mrs. Dorothy O'Connell Kirwan. A young woman with respect for tradition, Mrs. Kirwan has chosen to remain in the background. At first customers feared that she would renovate the place, but they now realize that this fear was groundless. "I know exactly how my father felt about McSorley's," Mrs. Kirwan said, "and so long as I am owner, no changes will be made. I won't even change the rule against women customers." She herself visits the saloon only on Sunday nights after hours. Even so, early in her ownership she made a mistake in judgment that brought about a crisis in McSorley's. She had a hard time getting over

this mistake, but she now looks back on it as a blessing in disguise and regards the crisis as a kind of inevitable demarcation between McSorley's past under Old John and Old Bill and her father and McSorley's present under her. She enjoys telling about this.

“For some months after my father's death,” she says, “I let things drift in McSorley's. I left everything in the hands of my father's two old bartenders, the day bartender and the night bartender, but the responsibility was too much for them and things gradually got out of hand, and I saw I had to find a manager—someone to look after the books and pay the bills and just generally take charge. And the more I thought about it the more I thought that the exact right person for the job was an uncle of mine named Joe Hnida. Well, I grew up in an Irish family that has lived in one of the old Irish neighborhoods on the west side of Greenwich Village for generations, in among the bohemians and the erratical personalities, and I thought I knew quite a lot about human behavior, but I soon found out that I didn't. Joe Hnida is a Czech, and he's an uncle of mine by marriage—he's my father's sister's husband. He worked for a limousine service that specializes in weddings and funerals; he was the supervisor of the drivers. Joe's a kind, decent, hardworking, trustworthy man, and I spoke to him and asked him if he would care to take over the management of McSorley's. He thought it over and decided he would. Well, Joe started out in McSorley's on a Monday morning and by the end of the week I was getting telephone calls from some of the real old-timers among the customers, all of them old friends of my father's, complaining about him. What I hadn't taken into account is that Joe is a man of few words, a very few—he just doesn't have any small talk. In addition, he's unusually self-sufficient. And also in addition, and I think he himself would agree, if he has any sense of humor at all it's a Czech sense of humor—it certainly isn't an Irish sense of humor. Anyway, it seemed that some of the old men who sit in those chairs along the wall in McSorley's all day long and do a lot of talking and arguing back and forth among themselves would try to start conversations with Joe and Joe just wouldn't participate. As one of them told me, ‘He'll go so far as to say “Good morning”

or “How do you do?” and he’ll answer you yes or no, but that’s about the full extent and sum total of what he has to say. He won’t even comment on the weather.’ ‘If he’s behind the bar,’ another one told me, ‘he’ll draw an ale for a customer and take his money and give him his change, and that’s the end of it. He just will not speak a single unnecessary word.’ A few of the old men developed a liking for Joe, but they were ones who never had much to say themselves. And before long, little by little, most of the old men convinced themselves that Joe considered them to be just a bunch of old bores and windbags and they also convinced themselves that he looked down on them, and to get back at him they began to mock him behind his back and call him ‘that stuck-up Czechoslovakian hearse-driver.’ When the old men telephoned me I tried to explain Joe to them and stand up for him and smooth things over. ‘After all,’ I said, ‘Bill McSorley didn’t exactly knock himself out talking. According to my father, there were days you couldn’t get a word out of him.’ But that didn’t do any good. Bill McSorley was different—he owned the place and he had earned the right to do as he pleased, and he might not necessarily care if you lived or died but he didn’t give you the impression that he looked down on you. This new man comes in here out of nowhere and he won’t even be polite. It went on and on like that. Weeks went by and months went by and things didn’t get any better. And then one day the oldest of the bartenders, a man I completely trust, telephoned me and said that just about the worst that could happen had happened. ‘It’s completely ridiculous, Dot,’ he said, ‘but the old men have discovered that Joe doesn’t like ale. He’s done his best to hide this, but it somehow slipped out, and they began right away picking on him about it, whereupon he got his back up and told them that he not only doesn’t like the taste of ale, he doesn’t like the smell of it. In fact, he said that the smell of it sometimes gives him a headache. Well, as I said, it sounds ridiculous, but the old men are acting as if they have found out something about Joe that is shocking beyond belief. And I know them—they’re not going to let this die down. And furthermore, to add to everything else, a number of them have suddenly become very sensitive and touchy—the situation in general has brought back to the surface differences between them that they thought they had buried and forgotten

long ago, and they have stopped speaking to each other, only sometimes they can't exactly remember why they stopped speaking, and they go around avoiding each other and at the same time looking puzzled. It's a mess.' I saw I had to do something. It was up to me. Now, it so happens that my husband, Harry Kirwan, grew up in an old, old town in Ireland named Ballyragget, down in Kilkenny. Ballyragget is a market town that is noted for its old public houses. Harry's mother died when he was a child and he lived with his grandmother. And quite early in his schooldays he started working for an old public house called Staunton's. On his way to school, he would stop off and sweep the place out, and after school he would stop off for the rest of the afternoon and wash glasses and fill the coal box and run errands and generally make himself useful. Harry has a studious nature; he's always read a lot. He wanted very much to be a professor in Ireland, but he couldn't afford the education. So when he was around nineteen he came to the United States and got a job in a manufacturing chemist company in the Bronx, and by the time we got married—which as a matter of fact was less than a year before the death of my father—he had worked himself up to where he was head bookkeeper. And so, anyway, when Harry came home that night, I said to him, 'Sit down, Harry. I've got something very serious I have to discuss with you.' I filled him in on the situation in McSorley's, and then I said to him, 'Harry, I know how much you love your job, and I hate to ask this, but do you think you could possibly find it in your heart to give it up and take over the management of McSorley's?' 'Well, Dot,' he said, and I remember every word he said that night, 'first of all, I don't love my job, I pretend to, but I hate it. And second of all, Dot, why in the name of God did it take so long for this thought to occur to you? You've heard me talk a lot about Staunton's back in Ballyragget, and most of the customers in there were hard-to-get-along-with old men, and I got along with them. I not only got along with them, I enjoyed getting along with them. I enjoyed observing them and I enjoyed listening to them. They were like actors in a play, only the play was real. There were Falstaffs among them—that is, they were just windy old drunks from the back alleys of Ballyragget, but they were Falstaffs to me. And there were Ancient Pistols among them.

And there was an old man with a broken-hearted-looking face who used to come in and sit in a chair in the corner with a Guinness at his elbow and stare straight ahead for hours at a time and occasionally mumble a few words to himself, and every time he came in I would say to myself, "King Lear." There were good old souls among those men, and there were leeches among them, leeches and lepers and Judases, and I imagine the cast of characters down in McSorley's is about the same. In other words, Dot,' he said, 'in answer to your question, yes, I'm willing to take a chance and go down to McSorley's and see if I can handle it.' The changeover didn't take long. Early next morning I went to Joe Hnida's apartment and had a heart-to-heart talk with him and begged him to forgive me for getting him into all of this, which he did, and he went back to the limousine service. And the very same day Harry gave notice up in the Bronx. And two Mondays later, he started in at McSorley's. I remember that day so well. I was worried half sick that I might've made another big mistake, so in the middle of the afternoon I telephoned McSorley's and asked to speak to Harry. 'Everything's O.K., Dot,' he said. 'I'm amazed at how much I'm enjoying this. I feel like I'm back home again—back home in Ballyragget, back home in Staunton's.' And when he got home that night and opened the door, the first thing he said was, 'I think I have finally found my right and proper place in the world.'"

Like Old John and Old Bill and like his father-in-law and his wife, Harry Kirwan is strongly opposed to change, and since he took over he has made only one change and that was a fiscal one and long overdue. He gave raises to the old bartenders, Eddie Mullins and Joe Martoccio, and he gave a raise to Mike Boiko, the cook, who is an old Ukrainian, and he gave a raise to Tommy Kelly, who broke down and cried when Harry told him about it. Tommy Kelly is perhaps the most important member of the staff of McSorley's, but his duties are so indefinite that the old men call him Kelly the Floorwalker. When business is brisk, he acts as the potboy—he carries mugs of ale from the bar to the tables, hooking his fingers through the handles of the mugs and carrying two in each hand. He is sometimes the fill-in bartender. He makes an occasional trip to the butcher or the

grocery store for Mike. He answers the coin-box telephone. In the winter he keeps the fire going in the stove. When he shows up, around 8:30 A.M., he is just a sad-eyed little man with a hangover, but by noon lukewarm ale has given him a certain stateliness; by six he is in such a good humor that he stands near the door and shakes hands with incoming customers just as if he were the proprietor. Some strangers think he is the proprietor and speak to him as Mr. McSorley. Kelly says that he had a long succession of odd jobs before he wound up in McSorley's. "And when I say odd," he says, "I mean odd." Once, for a brief period, he took a job as night clerk and night watchman in a large funeral parlor in Brooklyn, quitting because a corpse spoke to him. "I sat up front in the office all night," he says, "and I used to keep a pocket-sized bottle of gin in my coat hanging up in the locker in the back room, and I would go back there every little while and take a sip—not a real swallow, just a sip, just enough to keep me going through the night—and to get back there I had to pass through the parlor, the room where the coffins and the corpses were kept, and on this particular night I had to go past an open coffin that had a corpse in it, a man all laid out and fixed up and ready for the funeral in the morning, and I must've already gone past him a half a dozen times, passing and re-passing, and this time, as I was going past him, he spoke to me, and quite distinctly too. 'Take off your hat,' he said, 'and put out that cigar and pour out that gin and turn off that damn radio.'"

To a devoted McSorley customer, most other New York City saloons are tense and disquieting. It is possible to relax in McSorley's. For one thing, it is dark and gloomy, and repose comes easy in a gloomy place. Also, the barely audible heartbeatlike ticking of the old clocks is soothing. Also, there is a thick, musty smell that acts as a balm to jerky nerves; it is really a rich compound of the smells of pine sawdust, tap drippings, pipe tobacco, coal smoke, and onions. A Bellevue intern once remarked that for some mental states the smell in McSorley's would be a lot more beneficial than psychoanalysis or sedative pills or prayer.



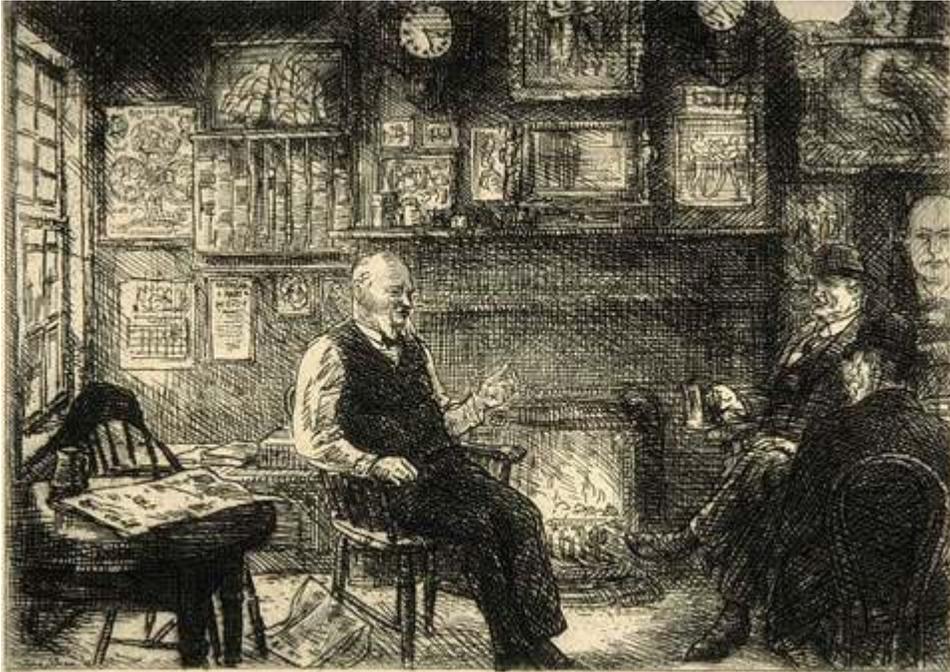
At midday McSorley's is crowded. The afternoon is quiet. At six it fills up with men who work in the neighborhood. Most nights there are a few curiosity-seekers in the place. If they behave themselves and don't ask too many questions, they are tolerated. The majority of them have learned about the saloon through John Sloan's paintings. Between 1912 and 1930, Sloan did five paintings, filled with detail, of the saloon—"McSorley's Bar," which shows Bill presiding majestically over the tap and which hangs in the Detroit Institute of Arts; "McSorley's Back Room," a painting of an old workingman sitting at the window at dusk with his hands in his lap, his pewter mug on the table; "McSorley's at Home," which shows a group of argumentative old-timers around the stove; "McSorley's Cats," in which Bill is preparing to feed his drove of cats; and "McSorley's, Saturday Night," which was painted during prohibition and shows Bill passing out mugs to a crowd of rollicking customers. Every time one of these appears in an exhibition or in a newspaper or magazine, there is a rush of strangers to the saloon. "McSorley's Bar" was reproduced in Thomas Craven's "A Treasury of Art Masterpieces," which came out in 1939, and it caused hundreds to go and look the

place over. There is no doubt that McSorley's has been painted more often than any other saloon in the country. Louis Bouché did a painting, "McSorley's," which is owned by the University of Nebraska. A painting, "Morning in McSorley's Bar," by a ship's purser named Ben Rosen won first prize in an exhibition



of art by merchant seamen in February, 1943. Reginald Marsh has done several sketches of it. In 1939 there was a retrospective exhibition of Sloan's work in Wanamaker's art department, and a number of McSorley patrons attended it in a body. One asked a clerk for the price of "McSorley's Cats." "Three thousand dollars," he was told. He believed the clerk was kidding him and is still indignant. Kelly likes the Sloan paintings but prefers a golden, corpulent nude which Old John hung in the back room many years ago, right beside Peter Cooper's portrait. To a stranger, attracted to the saloon by a Sloan painting, Kelly will say, "Hey, Mac, if you want to see some real art, go look at the naked lady in the back room." The nude is stretched out on a couch and is playing with a parrot; the painting is a copy, probably done by a Cooper Union student, of Gustave Courbet's "La Femme au Perroquet." Kelly

always translates this for strangers. "It's French," he says learnedly. "It means 'Duh Goil and duh Polly.'"



McSorley's bar is short, accommodating approximately ten elbows, and is shored up with iron pipes. It is to the right as you enter. To the left is a row of armchairs with their stiff backs against the wainscoting. The chairs are rickety; when a fat man is sitting in one, it squeaks like new shoes every time he takes a breath. The customers believe in sitting down; if there are vacant chairs, no one ever stands at the bar. Down the middle of the room is a row of battered tables. Their tops are always sticky with spilled ale. In the centre of the room stands the belly stove, which has an isinglass door and is exactly like the stoves in Elevated stations. All winter Kelly keeps it red hot. "Warmer you get, drunker you get," he says. Some customers prefer mulled ale. They keep their mugs on the hob until the ale gets as hot as coffee. A sluggish cat named Minnie sleeps in a scuttle beside the stove. The floor boards are warped, and here and there a hole has been patched with a flattened-out soup can. The back room looks out on a blind tenement court. In this room are three big, round dining-room tables. The kitchen is in one corner of the room; Mike keeps a folding boudoir screen around the gas range, and pots, pans, and paper bags of

groceries are stored on the mantelpiece. While he peels potatoes, he sits with early customers at a table out front, holding a dishpan in his lap and talking as he peels. The fare in McSorley's is plain, cheap and well cooked. Mike's specialties are goulash, frankfurters, and sauerkraut, and hamburgers blanketed with fried onions. He scribbles his menu in chalk on a slate which hangs in the bar-room and consistently misspells four dishes out of five. There is no waiter. During the lunch hour, if Mike is too busy to wait on the customers, they grab plates and help themselves out of the pots on the range.



The saloon opens at eight. Mike gives the floor a lick and a promise and throws on clean sawdust. He replenishes the free-lunch platters with cheese and onions and fills a bowl with cold, hardboiled eggs, five cents each. Kelly shows up. The ale truck makes its delivery. Then, in the middle of the morning, the old men begin shuffling in. Kelly calls them "the steadies." The majority are retired laborers and small businessmen. They prefer McSorley's to their homes. A few live in the neighborhood, but many come from a distance. One, a retired operator of a chain of Bowery flophouses, comes in from Sheepshead Bay practically every day. On the day of his retirement, this man said, "If my savings hold out, I'll never draw another sober breath." He says he drinks in order to forget

the misery he saw in his flophouses; he undoubtedly saw a lot of it, because he often drinks twenty-five mugs a day, and McSorley's ale is by no means weak. Kelly brings the old men their drinks. To save him a trip, they usually order two mugs at a time. Most of them are quiet and dignified; a few are eccentrics. Some years ago one had to leap out of the path of a speeding automobile on Third Avenue; he is still furious. He mutters to himself constantly. Once, asked what he was muttering about, he said, "Going to buy a shotgun and stand on Third Avenue and shoot at automobiles." "Are you going to aim at the tires?" he was asked. "Why, hell no!" he said. "At the drivers. Figure I could kill four or five before they arrested me. Might kill more if I could reload fast enough."

Only a few of the old men have enough interest in the present to read newspapers. These patrons sit up front, to get the light that comes through the grimy street windows. When they grow tired of reading, they stare for hours into the street. There is always something worth looking at on Seventh Street. It is one of those East Side streets completely under the domination of kids. While playing stickball, they keep great packing-box fires going in the gutter; sometimes they roast mickies in the gutter fires. In McSorley's the free-lunch platters are kept at the end of the bar nearer the street door, and several times every afternoon kids sidle in, snatch handfuls of cheese and slices of onion, and dash out, slamming the door. This never fails to amuse the old men.

The stove overheats the place and some of the old men are able to sleep in their chairs for long periods. Occasionally one will snore, and Kelly will rouse him, saying, "You making enough racket to wake the dead." Once Kelly got interested in a sleeper and clocked him. Two hours and forty minutes after the man dozed off, Kelly became uneasy—"Maybe he died," he said—and shook him awake. "How long did I sleep?" the man asked. "Since the parade," Kelly said. The man rubbed his eyes and asked, "Which parade?" "The Paddy's Day parade, two weeks ago," Kelly said scornfully. "Jeez!" the man said. Then he yawned and went back to sleep. Kelly makes jokes about the constancy of the old men. "Hey, Eddie," he said one morning, "old man Ryan must be dead!" "Why?" Mullins asked. "Well,"

Kelly said, "he ain't been in all week." In summer they sit in the back room, which is as cool as a cellar. In winter they grab the chairs nearest the stove and sit in them, as motionless as barnacles, until around six, when they yawn, stretch, and start for home, insulated with ale against the dreadful loneliness of the old. "God be wit' yez," Kelly says as they go out the door.

