

9-21-81



THE TALK OF THE TOWN

Around Dusk

WHEN the weather is comfortable, a group of young women regularly meet on Sixth Avenue in the Village and dance for beer money. Around dusk one day last week—the day of the power failure in lower Manhattan, when dusk was unusually conspicuous—they came out for the first time since spring, in one of their usual spots: the corner of Washington Place, in front of a bar called McBell's. Each of the dancers wore a white blouse, black corduroy knickers, white knee socks, black lace-up shoes, a blue velveteen vest, arm and leg garters with tiny bells attached, and a straw hat with a round crown. Long colored ribbons dangled from their hats, and the dancers waved white handkerchiefs as they moved. There were nine performers, including two musicians—a fiddler and a pipe-and-tabor player. Their music and their style of dance—morris dancing, an English folk ritual—go back several centuries. In costume and in motion, none of them looked old enough to buy anything stronger than a milkshake. They attracted a crowd.

Another crowd had gathered in front of Lamston's, on the opposite

side of Sixth Avenue. About thirty people stood quietly in a line outside the front door of the store, which, like many Manhattan buildings south of Fourteenth Street, was dark inside. They resembled any bunch of citizens in a long, boring queue, except that, given the circumstances, they also looked as if they might be well-behaved looters. They were waiting to buy flashlights. On the sidewalk a few feet away, a woman was selling grotesque red mushroom-shaped candles.

Back across the avenue, the morris dancers finished their last number—"Trunkels from Village of Ascot-under-Wychwood"—and then their leader held a straw hat upside down and made a brief speech. "Please put a coin in the hat," she said. "It's sure to bring you good luck and fortune throughout the year."

A white-haired, red-faced man who was wearing a blue blazer and coffee-colored slacks, and who gave the impression that he'd just spent a few hours in McBell's or some place like it, watched all this. "Lucky hat," he said. "I got a lucky hat, too. It's at home. Maybe I should bring my lucky hat out here and pass it around. I really should. You know what happened to me today? My lights went out."

