

Paolo Vassallo leaves the courtroom during

The Number One night club drugs scandal

Date

1972-1972

Medium

gelatin silver print

Description

Paolo Vassallo, an entrepreneur and playboy, ran The Number One night club that was the center of a drugs scandal during the early 1970's. An extract from a personal diary: <http://olgopinions.blog.kataweb.it/tag/number-one/> 'She was celebrating in a villa with distribution of confetti when word came that they had arrested Paulo Vassallo. "Hell is a friend! Do not you leave it in the lurch!" Federico Martignoni shouted "I'm going now to talk with the judge ..." It was not recommended. I was present and told him to be careful because I had known that Judge Sica and there was nothing to take it with lots of fun. No way. Federico Lancelot threw himself headlong into the courthouse with a big smile on his face.' An extract from the book "In Gold We Trust" By Deedee Panesar In the mid sixties, next to partying, another ugly beast began to raise its head: The Big C. or Cocaine. A night club such as "Number One" could not resist this temptation. The motto was: "What the customer wanted, the customer got". Cocaine became the fancy drug. The jet-set believed that it enhanced love-making and the wide-open sexual practices. Orgies and every variation on love making was the centre piece of a lot of conversations and activities. People seated in the VIP lounge could signal their desire for some white powder by ordering certain code drinks. For example a gin fizz would bring the drink to the table but also a packet of coke costing an additional fifty thousand Italian lira (a lot of money

at that time in regard to a normal monthly pay check). Bino Cicogna, Torri's partner, became totally involved in the 'coke' scene with an addiction so great that his nose and mouth began to show signs of collapse and disintegration. Bino was so far gone that he made a final desperate attempt to divorce himself from the drug and the entire scene that was destroying him. He fled to Rio de Janeiro (Brazil). Within a few weeks after his arrival in Brazil, he was found dead, with his head inside a plastic bag in an oven. After investigation, the conclusion was that he committed suicide in despair of his failure to cure himself. There was much speculation that Bino had been murdered because a clean, rehabilitated and sober Cicogna Bino would return to Italy to expose or denounce drug distribution at "Number One". Torri was devastated by the loss of his best friend and firmly believed he had been murdered. Not content to grieve alone, he went to the club one night and positioned himself in a prominent place. Calling for silence he announced to the assembled visitors that, Bino Cicogna was dead. "He was my greatest friend." He did not stop there. On and on he went with his rhapsody of grief accusing his listeners of being the cause of Bino's death. Finally, in a histrionic frenzy, he raged at the crowd, "I will destroy all of you!" The link between Bino Cicogna's supposed drug-related death and Torri's accusation at Number One solidified the rumors flying around Rome that drugs were being served in the club. It was the beginning of the end of the club. The police finally decided to act on the accusations. One night while Vassallo was away in Paris (France), the nightclub was raided. Cocaine was found on the premises. Many people in the club were arrested, many of them rich, influential and famous. A police investigation was commenced into all regular patrons of "Number One". The police anxiously awaited Vassallo's return to Rome. They staked out all the airports hoping to apprehend him. He arrived at Fiumicino Airport and the police followed him as he drove his yellow Volkswagen to his lawyer's office. When Vassallo went inside, the police removed his car and conducted a search. Under the car battery, they discovered a sizeable quantity of cocaine. Subsequently, they claimed that the chemical composition of the drug in Vassallo's car was exactly the same as that found in the nightclub. He was immediately taken into custody for questioning. He had an exculpatory explanation for the drugs. He told the police and the media was, "I've been framed. Torri hates me. He planted the drugs in my car and at the club to make good on his threat to destroy me." The judicial system in Italy now had a big,

big problem. On one side they had the arrest of all the customers in Number One for using drugs on a large scale in a public place because Number One was not a private club. On the other side they had the new allegations about Torri planting the cocaine. So they needed to clarify the latter first if they would go on with the first. Another problem was that among the 300+ arrested guests were a lot of very, very prominent Italian and Roman high society people from all sectors of life going from entertainment over government to politics and old aristocracy! It was media frenzy! The sharks smelled blood. Gossip galore in Rome, Italy and the world and Marisa Mell with her lover were in the middle of it! The public became into two camps: "Everyone is guilty or everyone is innocent." The latter group believed Torri was behind the frame-up of all these influential people. The conclusion by the authorities was then quickly made. Soon after the investigation against Torri began, it was determined that he should stand trial on the allegations that he planted the drugs. Then something strange happened with Pier Luigi Torri! He got a superiority fixation. Torri made himself hated wherever he went. He even enraged one of the judges by parking his Rolls-Royce in the judge's personal parking space. And the case went more stranger! One day, a young, beautiful woman arrived at the courthouse. She said she had evidence to give. She was led into the chambers to make her declaration but instead of talking, she produced a tape deck. She advised the court that her evidence was recorded on tape and she wished to play it for them. On the tape was a voice which everyone in the courtroom recognised immediately: "The chief judge/prosecutor of Rome". The court was hushed as all the assembled heard the voice say, "If you love me again one more time like this, very soon I'll let your boy out." The Italian papers had a field day, trumpeting the scandal upon scandal on this case. The prosecutor's office was in turmoil. The officials were very embarrassed and angry, not at the chief prosecutor, but rather, at the persons who would go to such lengths to bring the prosecutor's office into disrepute. It took little time for the prosecutor's office to announce their official response to the tape: a trap designed specifically to destroy the reputation of the chief judge. There was evidence that Torri had instigated the making of the tape and he was now charged with "defamation of a judge". In 1968, after a full year of trial on the original drug charge, Torri was acquitted. On the defamation charge however, he was convicted and a prison term was imposed. His lawyer Bombara immediately appealed the decision and Torri was allowed to remain free while

the appeal was heard. Bombara called Torri into his office and told him he would fight like a tiger for him but he must be prepared for the worst as the politics of this case were clearly against him. On the day of the appeal Bombara went before the judges and argued the case with everything he had. During a break in the proceedings he telephoned Torri to update him on how things were going. It was too late Torri had left Italy. He could not face the prospect of jail. Bombara knew that unless the appeal was successful, Torri would probably remain a fugitive. The appellate court voted to uphold the conviction. Of the many prominent people awaiting trial on the drug charges arising from the Number One case, all had their trials stayed indefinitely once Torri's appeal was upheld and he had fled Italy. Torri was about the only friendly witness for the prosecution's case about drug activities at the club. With Torri's conviction he was now a criminal, and could not be a credible witness. And, with his absence, there was no chance of his testifying at all. It was a most convenient result for the beautiful people who had been under investigation."

Dimensions

Overall: 30.2 x 20.5 cm (11 7/8 x 8 1/8 in.)