

Speakeasy Dead

*** Sample ***

Vicky Loebel

Discover more titles at www.vickyloebel.com

Copyright

©2013 Vicky Loebel
Speakeasy Dead
FIRST EDITION, Version 1.0
Published by Pentachronistic Press

I: Follow the Swallow

Trust no one.
—*The Boy's Book of Boggarts*

Bernard:

LOOKING BACK, it was the phrase “human sacrifice” that tipped me off something was rotten in the state of Falstaff, Arizona.

“Don’t you dare break a single one of those bottles,” my cousin Clara hissed over her shoulder. I tightened my grip, and the enormous black satchel I was carrying containing a couple of baby elephants and—apparently—glass bottles ceased its horrified clanking.

It wasn’t *witchcraft*, a word of passing acquaintance to any red-headed youth raised in our town. It wasn’t *magic*. In that age, everything was magic. Electricity was magic, telephones, biplanes lifting off the brown grass next to the county fairgrounds, jazz records blowing the crazy rhythms of the South up under the skirts of New York and Chicago were magic.

“Guard this”—Clara set her own satchel on the ground— “with your life.”

Cinema was magic and, of the many wizards of the silent screen, most magical of all was Beau Beauregard: war hero, vaudevillian, dancing heartthrob of *Ali Baba's Arabian Knights* and the even more popular *Blood of Ali Baba*. Beau Beauregard who, as Clara and I crouched in the dark alley between a row of ash cans and the Falstaff Ninepin Fellowship building, lay writhing in agony across the street at the Hollywood Grand Hotel, suffering from an advanced case of peritonitis, close to death.

All very tragic, but I was still working on Clara’s “human sacrifice” remark.

“A human what?” I bumped against one of the ash cans.

“Quiet, dummy!” Clara sidled over to the Fellowship’s coal chute and turned a key in the padlock. We ducked again as an open jalopy coughed and sputtered up the gravel alley behind us.

The air was cool, the evening brilliant in that benign way Mother Nature sometimes has, starry bracelets glittering around the limpid wrists of Heaven. Across the street around the front of the building, lights blazed, cars blared, and people called excitedly to one another as the three-day gala opening of the Hollywood Grand Hotel got underway, while through the Ninepin Fellowship’s back door, a dance band could be heard playing an Al Jolson tune:

*When your dreams fall apart
And despair fills your heart
Follow the swallows back home.*

A catchy sentiment, but one I couldn’t entirely agree with, since home for the particular swallow I was following was, in fact, the building we were breaking into. And I suspected despair lay ahead.

“Did you say....” I glanced uncomfortably from the coal chute to the back door, left open for ventilation, to the coal chute again. “*Human sacrifice?*”

Clara produced a brass can and oiled the coal chute hinges. I was beginning to wonder why she'd instructed me to dress in the second-best high school baseball uniform I'd never outgrown. It was hardly the glad rags I'd expected to don for an evening of escorting surplus females around the Ninepin Fellowship's dance floor.

Clara tilted the narrow chute open. "In you go."

"Me?" I staggered aghast. Nevertheless, despite the fact that I was three years older than Miss Clara Woodsen, a returning senior at Falstaff University (Delta Kappa Kilta), and a member of the superior sex to boot, I wasn't surprised to find myself, moments later, swallowing dust at the bottom of a very dark hole. Thus has it always been between myself and young C. She calls the shots. I take the lead in the chest.

"Ouch." A lump of coal probably doesn't mind the six foot drop into a cellar, but my backside was complaining. Fortunately, the space was empty, swept up neatly for summer by the Fellowship's Hungarian janitor. I dusted my hands and caught the satchel Clara was lowering on a rope.

"Mind the bottles," she admonished.

I untied the swag, received my cousin's smaller, lighter bag, and then provided a clean, soft landing pad for Clara's patent-leather Mary Janes.

There are females whose shoes I'd happily invite (girl attached) to drop six feet into my lap. There are others for whom, upon consideration, I'd chivalrously volunteer. Seventeen-year-old cousins belong to neither category, but since Clara leapt before I looked, my backside received another bump on the floor while my front endured a more painful indignity.

"Ow!" I curled into a ball like an electrocuted caterpillar.

"Bernard Benjamin" —Clara flicked a flashlight— "stop fooling around!" She'd dressed for the occasion cat-burglar-style in my *best* baseball uniform, waist-length rag curls tucked under a man's cap, looking convincingly masculine except for the Mary Janes.

Clara picked up her bag and tiptoed toward the door.

"Hey!" I lifted my luggage and legged it, limping, behind.

The coal-room opened onto a dimly-lit mad alchemist's laboratory, complete with gas jets, bubbling beakers, and six enormous stills topped with spiraling copper tubes. Sparks crackled along bent wires connecting a sequence of copper globes. Cabinets of herbs and powders surrounded a long wooden workbench cluttered with bowls, and stacks of crates and wooden barrels were lined up in rows against the walls. The smell of yeast and juniper berries scented the air.

Across the lab, facing away from us, a matronly woman in a severe brown ankle-length skirt was filling two jugs from a barrel of gin.

Hullo Priscilla—

Clara's palm throttled my greeting and dragged me sideways into shadow. We waited, listening to muffled music from above, until Clara's half-sister, Priscilla, finished filling and hustled her jugs out the laboratory's secret door.

In case you're wondering, let me present a few facts:

Fact A: The building we'd just broken into was the Falstaff Ninepin Fellowship, a combination witches' coven, bowling alley, and saloon of limited local repute.

Fact B: Young Clara's half-sisters (she has four, witches, wicked, all), while not exactly owning the coven, rule over it with fists of steel.

Fact C: The thumping music upstairs issued from a three-day dance contest Clara, herself, was staging to coincide with the elaborate opening of the Hollywood Grand Hotel.

Fact D: Men can be witches (a warlock is something else). And no, I wasn't one myself.

So there you have it: the situation on that fated Thursday night as I trailed Clara past her family's illegal distillery, through the secret door into the stairwell where jazz cascaded down a set of spiral steps—and thence into the witches' coven that filled the other half of the basement.

“Okay, coz.” I pushed the button for the electric light as Clara closed and bolted the door. “Spill.” No need for shushing now. An African lion could have roared his heart out in the fortress-like coven and not even the loneliest lady lion would have responded. It was a long windowless space, paneled in wood, with a tin ceiling, a Chinese shrine of a mother and child, and a dejected antelope who'd visited, briefly, and then wandered off, forgetting to take his head. Two Morris chairs, a sofa, and some footstools were grouped around a floor-to-ceiling rock fireplace, while several oriental rugs softened the granite floor.

My cousin dropped her bag on a side table. “Help me roll up the carpet.”

“Do we not,” I challenged, “work, eat, and sometimes sleep in this very building?” We flipped up the fringe of the centermost rug and began rolling. Beneath it, a fifteen-foot pentagram had been set into the granite in what looked like silver but was supposedly pure solidified magic. I glanced wistfully at the Victrola with its polished mahogany cabinet and racks of records. But foxtrots were probably not on Clara's agenda. “Why all this cloak and pointy stabbing instrument behavior?”

“I don't want anyone to know we're here.” Clara shook off her cap, letting the strawberry blonde curls that were her family's pride and joy tumble dramatically around her waist. She opened her bag, unpacked a gown, and started shimmying out of the baseball jersey.

I looked away hastily.

“Are not we both,” I asked the air, “supposed to be working at the dance contest upstairs? The one you sweet-talked Priscilla into letting us hold?”

Clara, fresh out of high school, denied permission to pursue a film career by her older, wiser, and much scarier sisters, had taken over the job of managing the Fellowship's saloon. But these were prohibition days. Good, honest drinking establishments had fallen out of fashion to be replaced by glamorous speakeasies and swank hotels. We had the safest, best-tasting homemade hooch in Arizona, Priscilla's genius running less toward the milk of human kindness and more toward potions, but we lacked the clientele.

Lacked it, until a prosperous local family, the Umbridges, teamed up with newspaper magnate William Randolph Hearst to build a new hotel: the Hollywood Grand, a sparkling seven-story monument to modern design, whose golden balconies, vast sweeping panes of glass, and curved steel trim were guaranteed to rake in well-heeled tourists by the ton.

With three of her four older sisters off speculating in the Florida coastline, young C. had hatched a scheme. She'd hold a dance contest during the hotel's gala opening—piggybacking on the excitement of the big party—and use the entry fees to redecorate the Fellowship's saloon. Clara had even managed, through pleading letters, *French*

photography, and an offer of half the profits, to persuade her film idol, Beau Beauregard, to grace the contest with his presence.

Sadly, the actor had fallen off of somebody else's wife's balcony and perforated several vital internal organs before the contest started. But since one hundred and fifty six non-refundable contest fees were already lining Clara's coffers, the actor's injury seemed to me less of a blow.

Not so young C., whose love for Beau, so she insisted, was like the sun, the moon, the stars, and radio, rolled into one.

"You can look now," she said.

I turned to gaze at cousin transformed from street Arab into lace and ecru confection, pale hair piled and pinned with her eldest and scariest half-sister's silver comb, figure corseted into a set of curves I hadn't suspected she possessed. For the first time, it struck me that Clara was no longer the sexless, skinny playmate of my youth.

"Close your mouth, Bernie."

She emptied my satchel onto the low table, where my attention immediately fixed upon a glittering cleaver.

I cleared my throat. "Now, just a minute."

Clara unfolded the legs of a serving tray and placed a silver goblet on its mirrored surface. Beside it went a rare and valuable bottle of Jack Daniels, and beside that a lumpy parcel wrapped in brown butcher's paper containing what—given the leaking red dribble—I earnestly hoped would prove to be next Sunday's roast.

"All right." This game had gone far enough. "What exactly are you up to?"

My cousin thrust forward a bundle of herb-scented candles. "Put these in the pentagram."

I crossed my arms.

"Please, Bernie?" She gave me the hang-dog kitten eyes. "This is for Beau."

"Listen." I shook my head. "I know you're sad."

Clara was not a witch, not like her sisters. She'd sworn an oath not to become a witch before age twenty-one. We'd *played* magic, as kids, the way boys and girls from normal families play doctor or Indian chief, but it was just a gag. None of our nursery games would help a dying man.

"You lost your parents," I said sympathetically. "I lost mine." The last decade had not been kind to families. "Now someone else you feel you care about is close to death. But this is pointless. And we're supposed to be working upstairs."

"Please?" The eyes got bigger. She clasped her hands. "Please, Bernie, pretty please?"

I humphed and took the candles to do her bidding, placing sandalwood tapers along the inner pentagon and mugwort and vervain inside the triangles. The candles stood up straight—without the cheap tin holders we'd used as kids.

Goosebumps began to rise along my arms.

Clara carried her tray to the pentagram. She poured a measure of Jack Daniels and tossed it back before filling the goblet. Next to the booze, she propped a studio portrait of Beauregard.

So far, despite the human sacrifice angle, I wasn't overly worried. We've had adventures, Clara and I, and while they often turn out badly for Bernie—broken limbs, municipal fines, long weekends cleaning privies and chopping wood—at least my

youth was never boring.

So as I say, I wasn't panicking. The only human handy was me, and I was pretty sure my cousin wouldn't slit my throat.

"So what—" My voice cut off as Clara produced a crystal vial.

It might have been empty. Only a witch could tell for sure, since hellfire, *demonic blood*, the source of genuine magic, does not reveal itself to uninitiated eyes. The vial could have held air or water.

Somehow, I knew it didn't.

"Clara." The joke was off the rose. "Clara, you can't do this." If she'd swiped demonic blood from her sisters, there'd be hell to pay. Literally. "You need to put that back."

She clasped the vial and muttered a word. There was a pop as the electric light went out and scented candles burst into flickering flame. A chill rolled through me.

She'd just done witchcraft. Three years, two months before age twenty-one.

Clara had broken her vow.

"But!" I sputtered as she dragged me inside the pentagram. "But! But!"

She took her sister's comb out of her hair and, quick as a cobra, pricked my wrist with metal tines. Blood flowed along my hand into the silver goblet to mix with Jack.

"Enough!" I yanked my arm away.

She'd used hellfire.

She'd done real magic.

"No more!"

Clara pricked herself, adding her blood to the goblet. Then she sprinkled some of the gruesome brew onto the photograph of Beau.

"Stop!" I grasped my cousin's shoulders. She'd broken her vow. "Look, we can fix this. We'll say I did it." I'd never promised not to become a witch. "It's not too late!" I'd end up chopping wood for fifty years, but that was nothing compared to what would happen to Clara—to both of us—if she got caught.

"Let go!" She shook me off.

I grabbed her arm.

"Don't stop me, Bernie." She struggled. "I'm going to save the man I love, and no one's going to get in my way." Clara lunged for her tray. When she stood up, the cleaver was in her hand. "Not even you."

"You can't be serious!"

"Besides, this isn't breaking my promise." Clara advanced. "I'm not going to become a witch."

I closed my eyes.

"I'm going to summon a demon and be a warlock instead."

I could have run. I could have decked her with a clean conscience and left her to face her sisters' wrath. Instead, I did as I have always done when faced with one of Clara's schemes. I made her job easy.

I fainted dead away.