

THE GREAT AMERICAN SALOON SERIES



CAPITAL BEER AT THE UNION JACK

by Aram Bakshian, Jr.

As you might expect, Washington, D.C., where nearly everyone is either a primary or secondary parasite of the federal government, is not the ideal spot for really good watering holes. True enough, there are plenty of mediocre bars. The nation's capital has the highest per capita rate of alcohol consumption in the Republic and is pitted with singles bars, disco bars, power bars, jazz bars, sushi bars, gay bars, sports bars, biker bars, black bars, Latino bars, country western bars, piano bars, topless bars, and, lately, even *tapas* bars. But there are precious few saloons really worthy of the name, congenial spots an intelligent drinker can comfortably settle into.

The root problem may be Washington's chronic shortage of good drinkers. Don't get me wrong; the capital is awash in *drunks*, but they are an altogether different breed. D.C. drunks, while there are hybrids, fall (I use the verb advisedly) into five major categories:

(1) *The Hey-Look-At-Me's*. These pathetic chumps just want to feel important—which, for insurmountable reasons, they can't do while sobriety and reality reign. This class consists largely of junior congressional aides, yuppie lawyers, brokers, and flacks, journalists *manqués*, and visiting firemen out on a toot they wouldn't dare to contemplate back home in Cornbread County. Their common bond is their incurable obscurity. As John Prokoff, the master dispenser who presided over the old Members Bar at the National Press Club for nearly thirty years, used to say, their motto is, "Get drunk and be somebody."

(2) *The Whinos*. Boy, do they feel sorry for themselves, twenty-four hours a day! The only hitch is, they can't give full vent to their self-pity on the job, at home, or while sober, at least not as blatantly or brassily as when soaked. Most Whinos are either male wimps

with good degrees and lousy jobs or resentfully woozy women in their middle thirties and beyond who (a) have a career but no children, (b) have children but no career, or (c) have both, but still rail at their fate.

(3) *The Ranting Rambos*. What they really want to do is punch someone in the nose, not drink, which is just their way of getting up the courage to uncork their pent-up aggression. Fortunately, they usually lack the guts and motor coordination to connect. Unless, that is, they come into chance collision with a Type 4 (see below).

(4) *The Punchbowl Punching Bags*. We all know at least one of these sad sacks, destined to go through life with a psychic "Kick Me" sign on their backs. Punching Bags don't ask much;



they just want to be punched in the nose. Unlike the Rambos, theirs is a more modest objective, easily attained at the hands of a larger, slightly less sozzled drunk, or a decent drinker whose wife/girlfriend/sister/daughter they have made a pathetic—and usually platonic—pass at.

(5) *The Garbage-In-Garbage-Outers*. Like an American Indian chug-a-lugging his first fifth of firewater, these quietly offensive characters come to a bar to guzzle until they fall asleep, vomit, or are ejected. On a really good day, they may manage a three-in-one. I vividly recall one Washington-based British correspondent of my acquaintance (let us call him "Willy Loathsome") who actually faded into a fitful slumber, lost his lunch, and was then hauled out of a bar and deposited on the pavement without ever regaining consciousness. Luckily, it happened in October, and Washing-

ton is famous for its gentle autumns.

Even the best-regulated of Washington drinking places will have its share of all of the above. The point is that they are bearable—rather like a tolerable bacteria count—when countered by a sufficient number of sound, congenial drinkers, presided over by able management in pleasant surroundings. Even in Washington, Samuel Johnson's maxim holds true—that there is "nothing which has yet been contrived by man by which so much happiness is produced as by a good tavern or inn."

You just have to know where, and when, to go. Time was when the Capital City could boast many such places. In the April 1974 issue of *The American Spectator*, in one of the first installments of this series, I described such a spot. Alas, the Members Bar of the National Press Club today is but a pale shadow of its former self, remodeled into what one indignant veteran describes as an "imitation Best Western cocktail lounge." The conversation can still be good and the bartenders are pros, but it just isn't the mecca of civilized saloonery that it used to be. A total rather than a partial loss is Marshalls, a rambling old wood-paneled saloon on upper Pennsylvania Avenue where writers, stagehands, jocks, airline stewardesses, politicians, and amiable riff-raff used to rub elbows in easy camaraderie. Marshalls closed its doors in the spring of 1990 through loss of lease rather than customers, and so far nothing has filled its special void.

For discerning beer drinkers, however, there is a light at the end of the tunnel. At least one decent little pub has recently come onto the scene that provides full bar service and an outstanding selection of domestic and imported beers, including Young's, Harp, and Oxford—a tasty local dark brew—on tap at only \$2.50 a pint. While the Union Jack does a brisk business with a loyal core clientele, it is not, thank God, on the tourist or trendy route.

Long may it remain so. Housed in the Canterbury, a small, well-run suite

hotel on quiet N Street just one block east of Connecticut Avenue, the Union Jack is centrally but discreetly located. While the beams, rafters, and stucco may remind some of Stockbroker Tudor, an authentically lived-in (not to mention drunk-in) atmosphere prevails and the customer mix—at the bar, by the dartboard, or seated on just-sufficiently-threadbare imitation Sheraton chairs at small Regency roundtables—is about as good as it gets in Washington.

You never know who you'll bump into. More importantly, when you do, the surprise is usually a pleasant one. One evening, I fell into conversation with a rather attractive vegetarian cantoress (sic) from California's leading Reform synagogue who was in town for an animal rights rally but was otherwise quite nice and apparently sane. On a somewhat louder occasion I found myself seated with a jolly band of Glasgow and Ulster rugby enthusiasts celebrating a hometown win. They turned out to be excellent company once I gave them an accurate description of the Battle of the Boyne (with a particularly moving account of the death of Marshall Schomberg) and agreed to sing a verse of "The Sash My Father Wore." The encounter was all the more enjoyable since I was accompanied by "Gannon the Cannon," a dyed-in-the-wool Irish Catholic weighing nearly 300 pounds; not a single shot was fired in anger.

Indeed, "catholic" is the word for the Union Jack clientele: conservative think-tankers from the neighboring American Enterprise Institute often sitting cheek-by-jowl with their Brookings counterparts, Iranian émigrés (occasionally including a gentlemanly Persian who played a major role in the Iran-contra hearings), assorted politicians, and the nicer sort of out-of-town business and holiday visitors attracted to a quiet, smartly run suite hotel like the Canterbury rather than the mega-glitter caravanserais favored by vulgarians with fat expense accounts.

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Depending on the time of the day, week, or year, you may meet politicians, graduate students, bike messengers, war-gamers, Morris dancers, Morgan collectors (the car, not the horse), or a gaggle of geography teachers in town for a convocation at the nearby National Geographic Society (one such group presented me with an inflatable globe after an impromptu

geography quiz). Add to this a dollop of expatriate Brits, a smattering of Canadians and Australians from neighboring diplomatic missions, and a usually minimal measure of Type 1-5 Washington drunks, and you have the makings of as good a saloon evening as you're likely to find anywhere in the Nation's Capital. After serving lunch, the Union Jack reopens at 5:30, Mon-

day through Saturday, and closes, at least in theory, at 11:00 p.m. Authentic—for some, all too much so—fish and chips are available until at least 9:00, and there is a first-rate restaurant, Chaucer's, downstairs in the hotel.

And when the screen doors of the Union Jack are finally drawn shut by Osman, the crack senior barman (an Afghan who would be practicing medi-

cine today but for the late unpleasantness in his homeland, and who speaks much better English than most of his American customers), you can always toddle a few blocks northward for a slightly more upmarket nightcap at another of Washington's few great watering holes, the Fairfax Bar at the Ritz Carlton, of which more in a future number of this journal. □

THE TALKIES



EMPTY DREAMS

by James Bowman

When I taught English to small boys and compelled them to offer up creative prose compositions for my approval, I used to tell them that all essays ending with the words "... and then I woke up" or any formula approximating thereunto would be rewarded with instant failure. How I wish that Bruce Joel Rubin and Adrian Lyne had had the benefit of my tuition at a tender age! I don't claim to possess the pedagogical skill that would have been necessary to make them more literate, but at least I might have planted a doubt, a hesitation in their minds which, many years later, would have produced a full-blown sense of artistic prudence and restraint and spared the world their co-creation, *Jacob's Ladder*.

This picture has been a long time in the making ("Not long enough," I hear you add), and its origins in the 1970s show through the slick, nineties look of the finished product. It really belongs together with movies like *Three Days of the Condor* or *Capricorn One*, those left-wing paranoid fantasies that seemed to gush forth from some subterranean Hollywood pool, buried deep beneath the McCarthyite substrata, after Watergate. Poor old Richard Nixon, who was always the big bad wolf to the oppressed artistic red riding hoods of California, has a lot to answer for.

In *Jacob's Ladder*, the wicked military/CIA plot is to develop a hallucinogenic drug, with the help of a plea-bargaining hippie chemist, which renders men more aggressive. Because they are stupid as well as evil, the high-

up military/CIA types do not foresee what will happen when the stuff is tried out on a particular battalion in Vietnam in 1971. The hippie chemist does, of course. "I tried to warn them," he says, through his anguished grimace. Someone always does. But they never listen, do they? They give the men the drug and the men go berserk and kill each other. Then the stupid and evil military/CIA types engage in a cover-up. Happens all the time.

What's original about this version of the standard story is that the paranoid dream-world is recognized as, in fact, a dream-world. The trouble is that the rest of the world is also a dream. Instead of "and then I woke up" at the end, it's "and then I didn't wake up," since it turns out that all that has happened in the film is the vision of hell and (only a little bit at the end) heaven of the hero *in articulo mortis*. We thought it was kind of weird. In the end the field medics pronounce him dead, and we discover that his whole post-Vietnam life was a dream, as in Ambrose Bierce's story, *Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge*. Oops! I've just given away the ending. Never mind. If you've read this far you won't be going to the film unless you're a masochist—in which case you will presumably be glad to have your pleasure in it spoiled anyway.

There is a certain consistency to Hollywood eschatology, which was developed during the Second World War years when popular demand for a comforting version of the afterlife was at its strongest. Taking their cue from *Topper* of 1937, films like *Here Comes Mr. Jordan* (its remake by Warren Beat-

ty, *Heaven Can Wait*, stole its title from a much better Lubitsch film of 1943 on the same theme), *Down to Earth*, *A Guy Named Joe*, *Stairway to Heaven*, *Between Two Worlds*, and *Angel on My Shoulder* took us through a breezy tour of that "undiscovered country from whose bourne no traveler returns"—and returned us happy and comforted. As in traditional folklore, the ghosts generally had some unfinished business to take care of here below before they were beamed up to heaven and ... whatever. Eating *pâté de foie gras* to the sound of trumpets, perhaps.

In the last couple of years we have had another spate of ghost pictures, most of them even more sappy than the originals. Last year there was what may still be, in spite of this year's stiff competition, the all-time schmalz champion, *Field of Dreams*, appropriately set in a cornfield, and a near competitor in Steven Spielberg's remake of *A Guy Named Joe* called *Always*, in which Audrey Hepburn played Richard Dreyfuss's heavenly guide. Oh dear, oh dear. Now, however, the ghost-world shows signs of becoming a bit more problematical—not only in *Jacob's Ladder* but also in *Flatliners*, where a bunch of medical students playing around with near-death experiences find that "we've brought our sins back; and they're pissed."

Well, it's a start. The trouble is that cutting mere sentimentality with simple moralism doesn't help very much. The basic outlines of the traditional ghost movie remain intact even in *Flatliners*, which teaches that bad people are in for a rough time in the hereafter. Once the sins are placated, however, the karmic tension dispersed and the lesson

learned that "everything we do matters," the boys and girls are ready to behave themselves and go on living some unimaginably holy life—except that they've presumably got to do it in the landscape of nightmare grotesques (cf. *Batman*, *Dick Tracy*) that the movie makes of Chicago.

Alongside *Jacob's Ladder*, Bruce Joel Rubin gives us a more traditional version of the spook flick in what has turned out to be the biggest grossing movie of the year so far, *Ghost*. This plays on the heartstrings in exactly the same way as the WWII weepies and goes to show that you shouldn't tamper with a successful formula. Its slogan, "You will believe," is precisely wrong. It should be: "You will feel good about the death thing for a couple of hours." And why not? Belief is a much more difficult business, and sentimentalizing may be all that most of us have to tide us over the lack of it. Rubin even supplies some cute little demons to drag the souls of the baddies down to hell and render poetic justice *ex machina* (demon effects by Industrial Light and Magic).

What is most depressing about all this is that its sentimentality is all there is to it. Given the cinematic possibilities of such fantasies, it is a bit disappointing to learn that the mystery of death and transfiguration amounts to no more than ordinary people rendered invisible to the living. But then that is just business as usual in Hollywood. We are flattered to learn that dead people, like gangsters, cowboys, policemen—fill in the blank—are just like us. So if you think the Righteous Brothers singing "Unchained Melody" is beautiful music and tend to fall asleep during *Macbeth*, you'll love *Ghost*. →