### The Evil Drink Does

Isaac Asimov

“The evil drink does,” said George, with a heavily alcoholic sigh, “would be hard to assess.”

“Not if you were sober,” I said.

He stared at me out of his light blue eyes with a look com­pounded of reproach and indignation. “When,” he said, “was I anything else?”

“Since you were born,” I said, and then, realizing I was doing him an injustice, I amended my remark hastily. “Since you were weaned.”

“I take it,” said George, “that that is one of your ineffectual attempts at humor.” And with a fine absence of mind, he lifted my drink to his lips, sipped and put it down again, holding on to it with a grip of iron.

I let it go. Taking a drink from George was much akin to taking a bone from a hungry bulldog.

He said, “In making my remark, I was thinking of a young woman, one in whom I took much interest in an avuncular fash­ion, by the name of Ishtar Mistik.”

“An unusual name,” I said.

“But an appropriate one, for Ishtar is the name of the Babylo­nian goddess of love, and a veritable goddess of love is what Ishtar Mistik was—in potential, at least.”

Ishtar Mistik [George said] was what would be called a fine figure of a woman, if one had a congenital tendency to deal in understatement. Her face was beautiful in the classic sense, ev­ery feature perfect, and it was crowned by an aureole of golden hair that was so fine and sparkling as to seem a halo. Her body could only be described as Aphrodisian. It was billowing and beautiful, a combi­nation of firmness and yieldingness encased in smooth perfection.

You may wonder, thanks to your foul mind, how I am so aware of the tactile state of her charms, but I assure you it is a long-distance assessment that I can make because of my general expe­rience in such matters, and not because of any direct obser­vation in this particular case.

Fully dressed she would make a better centerfold than any you might find in the more ordinary fashion of display in the magazines devoted to the artistic views of such things. A narrow waist, topped and bottomed by such equi-balanced lushness as you could not well imagine without having seen her, long legs, graceful arms, her every movement designed for rapture.

And although one could scarcely be so coarse-grained as to demand anything more of such physical perfection, Ishtar also had a keen and supple mind, having completed her studies at Columbia University with a *magna cum laude*— though one might fairly sup­pose that the average college professor, in grad­ing Ishtar Mistik, might feel moved to give her the benefit of the doubt. Since you your­self are a professor, my dear friend (and I say this without mean­ing to hurt your feelings), I can have only the lowest opinion of the profession generally.

One might have thought that, with all this, Ishtar could have her pick of men, and renew her pick from a fresh batch each day. In fact, it had crossed my mind now and then that if she ever picked me I would endeavor to meet the challenge out of my gentlemanly regard for the fair sex, but I must admit I hesi­tated to make that fact clear to her.

For if Ishtar did have a slight fault, it was that she was rather a formidable creature. She was not more than an inch above six feet; had a voice which, when she was moved, rather resembled a trumpet call; and had been known to have turned on a fairly large hoodlum who had incautiously tried to take liberties with her, lifting him bodily and tossing him across the road, a rather wide one, and into a lamppost. He spent six months in the hospi­tal.

There was a certain reluctance on the part of the male popula­tion to make any advances in her direction, therefore, even of the most respectful kind. The undeniable impulse to do so was al­ways aborted by a long consideration as to whether it was physi­cally safe to make the attempt. Even I myself, brave as a lion though you know me to be, found myself thinking of the possi­bility of broken bones. Thus, to coin a phrase, conscience doth make cowards of us all.

Ishtar well understood the situation, and complained to me of it bitterly. I remember the occasion very well. It was a gorgeous late spring day and we occupied a bench in Central Park. It was the occasion, I recall, when no fewer than three joggers failed to negotiate a curve while turning to look at Ishtar and ended up nose to bark with a tree.

“I am likely to remain virginal all my life,” she said, her deli­ciously curved lower lip trembling. “No one seems interested in me, no one at all. And I will be twenty-five soon.”

“You understand, my — my dear,” I said, cautiously reaching toward her to pat her hand, “that young men are in awe of your physical perfection and do not feel worthy of you.”

“That is ridiculous,” she said forcefully enough for distant passers-by to turn inquiringly in our direction. “What you're trying to say is that they are scared silly of me. There's some­thing about the way in which those silly things look up at me when we're introduced, and rub their knuckles after we shake hands, which just tells me that nothing will happen. They just say, ‘Pleased to meet you,’ and move away quickly.

“You have to encourage them, Ishtar dear. You must look upon a man as a fragile flower who can bloom properly only under the warm sunshine of your smile. Somehow you must indicate to him that you are receptive to his advances and refrain from any attempt to seize him by the collar of his jacket and the seat of his pants and bash his head against the wall.”

“I have never done that,” she said indignantly. “Hardly ever. And how on earth do you expect me to indicate myself to be receptive? I smile and say, ‘How do you do?’ don't I, and I always say, ‘What a nice day it is’ even when it isn't.

“Not enough, my dear. You must take a man's arm and tuck it gently under your own. You might tweak a man's cheek, stroke his hair, nibble daintily at his fingertips. Little things like that are indicative of a certain interest, a certain willingness on your part to engage in friendly hugs and kisses.”

Ishtar looked horrified. “I couldn't do that. I just couldn't. I was brought up in the strictest possible way. It is impossible for me to behave in anything but the most correct manner. It must be the man who makes the advances and even then I must hold back as hard as I can. My mother always taught me that.”

“But Ishtar, do it when your mother isn't looking.”

“I couldn't. I'm just too — too inhibited. Why can't a man just — just come at me?” She flushed at some thought that must have passed through her mind at those words, and her large but per­fectly shaped hand clutched at her heart. (I wondered idly if she knew how privileged her hand was at such a time.)

I think it was the word “inhibited” that gave me my idea. I said, “Ishtar, my child, I have it. You must indulge in alcoholic beverages. There are a number that are quite pleasant-tasting and lend one a healthful invigoration. If you were to invite a young man to share several grasshoppers with you, or mar­garitas, or any of a dozen other drinks I might mention, you would find that your inhibitions would quickly decrease and so would his. He would be emboldened to make suggestions to you that no gentleman should make to a lady, and you would be emboldened to giggle when he did so and suggest that you visit a hotel of your acquaintance where your mother would not find you.”

Ishtar sighed and said, “How wonderful that would be, but it wouldn't work.”

“Certainly it would. Almost any man would be glad to join you in a drink. If he hesitates, offer to pick up the check. No man of any worth whatever would refuse a drink when a lady offers to —”

She interrupted. “That's not it. It's *my* problem. I can't drink.”

I had never heard of such a thing. “You merely open your mouth, my dear —”

“I know that. I can *drink*— I mean I can swallow the stuff. It's the effect on me. It makes me very woozy.”

“But you don't drink *that* much, you —”

“One drink makes me woozy, except when it makes me sick and I throw up. I've tried lots of times, and I just can't have more than one drink, and once I have it, I am really in no mood for — you know. It's a defect in my metabolism, I believe, but my mother says it's a gift from heaven designed to keep me virtuous against the wiles of wicked men who would try to deprive me of my purity.”

I must admit that I was left nearly speechless for a moment at the thought of someone who would actually find merit in an inability to indulge in the pleasures of the grape. But the thought of such perversity hardened my resolution, and threw me into such a state of indifference to danger that I actually squeezed the resilience of Ishtar's upper arm and said, “My child, leave it to me. I shall arrange everything.”

I knew exactly what I had to do.

I have undoubtedly never mentioned my friend Azazel to you, for on this subject I am totally discreet — I see you are about to protest that you know of him, and considering your well-known record as a despiser of truth (if I may say this without intention of embarrassing you) I am not surprised.

Azazel is a demon possessed of magical powers. A *small* de­mon. He is, in point of fact, merely two centimeters tall That, however, is good since it makes him quite anxious to demon­strate his worth and ability to one like myself whom he is pleased to consider an inferior being.

He responded to my call as always, although it is useless of you to expect me to give you the details of the method I use for obtaining his presence. It would be beyond your puny brain (no offense) to control him.

He arrived rather out of humor. Apparently he was watching something in the nature of a sporting event on which he had wagered close to a hundred thousand zakinis and he seemed a little put out at not being able to witness the result. I pointed out that money was dross and that he was put in this universe to help intelligences in need and not to pile up worthless zakinis which he would, in any case, lose upon the next bet even if he won them now, which was doubtful.

These rational and unanswerable points did nothing at first to calm down the miserable creature whose predominant charac­teristic is a rather disgusting tendency to selfishness, so I offered him a quarter-dollar. Aluminum is, I believe, the medium of exchange in his world and while it is not my intention to en­courage him to expect a material return for the trifling assistance he might give me, I gathered the quarter was something in ex­cess of a hundred thousand zakinis to him and, in consequence, he rather handsomely admitted that my concerns were of more importance than his own. As I always say, the force of reason is bound to make itself felt eventually.

I explained Ishtar's problem and Azazel said, “For once, you have set me a reasonable problem.”

“Of course,” I said. After all, as you know, I am not an unrea­sonable man. I need only have my own way to be satisfied.

“Yes,” said Azazel. “Your miserable species does not metabo­lize alcohol efficiently, so that intermediate products accumulate in the bloodstream and these produce various unpleasant symp­toms asso­ciated with intoxication — a word appropriately de­rived, my studies of your dictionaries assure me, from Greek words meaning ‘poison within.’

I sneered. The modern Greeks, as you know, mix their wine with rosin, and the ancient Greeks mixed it with water. It was no wonder they spoke of “poison within” when they had poisoned the wine before ever drinking it in the first place.

Azazel went on, “It will only be necessary to adjust the en­zymes appropriately in order to have her metabolize the alcohol swiftly and unerringly to the stage of the two-carbon fragment which is the metabolic crossroads for fat, carbohydrate, and pro­tein metabolism and there will then be no evidence of intoxica­tion at all. Alcohol will thus become a wholesome food for her.”

“We have to have *some* intoxication, Azazel; just enough to produce a healthful indifference to foolish strictures learned at the maternal knee.”

He seemed to understand me at once. “Ah, yes. I know about mothers. I remember my third mother telling me, ‘Azazel, you must never clap your nictitating membranes together in front of a young malobe,’ when how else can you 濫

I interrupted him again. “Can you arrange for just a slight bit of accumulation of intermediate in order to produce just a wee bit of exhilaration?”

“Easily,” said Azazel, and, in an unlovely display of greed, stroked the quarter I gave him, which, on edge, was taller than he was.

It was not till about a week later that I had a chance to test Ishtar. It was in a midtown hotel bar where she illuminated the place to the point where several patrons put on dark glasses and stared.

She giggled. “What are we doing here? You *know* I can't drink.”

“This won't be a drink, dear girl, not a *drink.* It's just a pep­permint squash. You'll like it.” I had prearranged matters and signaled for a grasshopper.

She sipped at it delicately and said, “Oh, it *is* good,” then leaned back and allowed it to pour down her throat with aban­don. She passed the tip of her beautiful tongue over her equally beautiful lips and said, “May I have another?”

“Of course,” I said genially, “At least, you might have one were it not for the fact that I seem to have foolishly left my wallet —”

“Oh, I'll pay. I have *lots* of money.”

A beautiful woman, I've always said, stands never so tall as when she stoops to take a wallet out of the purse between her feet.

Under those circumstances, we drank freely. At least she did. She had another grasshopper, then a vodka, then a double whis­key and soda and a few other things and when it was all down, she showed absolutely no sign of intoxication, though her win­some smile was more intoxicating than anything she had im­bibed. She said, “I feel so nice and warm, and so *ready,* if you know what I mean.”

I thought I did, but I wished to jump to no conclusions. “I don't think your mother would like it.” (Testing, testing.)

She said, “What does my mother know about it? Nothing! And what is she *going* to know about it? Nothing.” She looked at me speculatively, and then leaned over and lifted my hand to her perfect lips. “Where can we go?” she said.

Well, my friend, I think you know my feeling about such things. To refuse a young lady who asks with yearning politeness for a simple favor is not something I am likely to do. I've been brought up to be a gentleman at all times. But on *this* occasion, several thoughts occurred to me.

First, though you might scarcely credit this, I am a little — just a touch — past my best days, and a woman as young and strong as Ishtar might take some time to satisfy, if you understand me. Then, afterward, if she should remember what had happened, and should choose to resent it and to feel as though I had taken advantage of her, the consequences might be uncomfortable. She was a creature of impulse and she might produce a handful of broken bones before I had a chance to explain.

So I suggested a walk to my rooms and took the long route.

The fresh evening air cleared her head of its mild warmth and I was safe.

Others were not. More than one young man came to tell me of Ishtar for, as you know, there is something about the benign dignity of my bearing that elicits confidences. It was never in a bar, unfor­tunately, for the men in question seemed to avoid bars, for a time, at least. They had usually tried to match Ishtar drink for drink — for just a while — with unhappy results.

“I'm absolutely positive,” one of them said, “that she had a hidden pipe that led from the corner of her mouth down to a hogshead under the table, but I couldn't spot it. But if you think *that* was something, you should have been there later.”

The poor fellow was gaunt with the horror of the experience. He tried to tell me, but he was almost incoherent. “The *de­mands, “* he kept saying over and over again. “Insatiable! Insatia­ble!”

I was glad I had had the good sense to avoid something that men in their prime had barely survived.

I did not see much of Ishtar at that time, you understand. She was very busy — yet I could see she was consuming the supply of nubile men at a fearful rate. Soon or later she would have to extend her range. It was sooner.

She met me one morning as she was about to leave for the airport. She was more *zaftig* than ever, more pneumatic, more startling in all possible measurements. Nothing of what she had gone through seemed to have affected her, except for the more and better.

She pulled a bottle out of her purse. “Rum,” she said. “They drink that down in the Caribbean and it's a very mild and very pleasant beverage.”

“Are you going to the Caribbean, dear?”

“Oh, yes, and elsewhere. The men at home seem to be of poor endurance and weak spirit. I am very disappointed in them, although there have been moments of high adventure. I am very grateful to you, George, for making it possible. It seems to have begun when you first introduced me to that peppermint squash. It seems a shame that you and I haven't —”

“Nonsense, dear girl. I work for humanity, you know. I never think of myself at all.”

She placed a kiss upon my cheek that burned like sulfuric acid and she was gone. I mopped my brow in considerable relief, but I did flatter myself that for once, my application to Azazel had brought about something that had ended happily, for Ishtar who, through inheritance, was independently wealthy, could now indulge indefinitely and without harm in her artless enthusi­asms for alcoholic and masculinic pleasures.

Or so I thought.

It was not until more than a year had passed that I heard from her again. She was back in town and she phoned me. It was a while before I realized who it was. She was hysterical.

“My life is over,” she screamed at me. “Even my mother no longer loves me. I can't understand how it happened but I'm sure it's your fault. If you had not introduced me to that pepper­mint squash, I just know that nothing like this would ever have happened.”

“But what has happened, my dear?” I asked, trembling. An Ishtar who was furious with me would not be an Ishtar it would be safe to approach.

“You come here. I'll show you.”

My curiosity will someday be the end of me. On that occasion, it nearly was. I couldn't resist going to her mansion on the out­skirts of town. Wisely, I left the front door open behind me. When she approached with a butcher knife, I turned and fled with a speed that I would have been proud of in my younger days. Fortunately, she was in no position to follow, considering her condition.

She left again, shortly afterward, and, as far as I know, has not returned since. I live in dread that someday she will The Ishtar Mistiks of this world do not forget.

George seemed to think he had come to the end of the story.

“But what had happened?” I asked.

“You don't see? Her body chemistry had been adjusted to convert alcohol very efficiently to the two-carbon fragment that was the crossroads of carbohydrate, fat, and protein metabolism. Alcohol was to her a healthful food. And she drank like a six-foot sponge—incredibly. And all of it slid down the metabolic chain to the two-carbon fragment and, from that, up the meta­bolic chain to fat. She had, in a word, become stout; in two words, grossly obese. All that gorgeous beauty had expanded and exploded into layer upon layer of lard.”

George shook his head in mingled horror and regret and said, “The evil drink does would be hard to assess.”