**A Drink of Darkness**

Robert F. Young

“You’re walking down Fool’s Street,” Laura used to say when he was drinking, and she had been right. He had known even then that she was right, but knowing had made no difference; he had simply laughed at her fears and gone on walking down it, till finally he stumbled and fell. Then, for a long time, he stayed away, and if he had stayed away long enough he would have been all right; but one night he began walking down it again—and met the girl. It was inevitable that on Fool’s Street there should be women as well as wine.

He had walked down it many times since in many different towns, and now he was walking down it once again in yet another town. Fool’s Street never changed no matter where you went, and this one was no different from the others. The same skeletonic signs bled beer names in naked windows; the same winos sat in doorways nursing muscatel; the same drunk tank awaited you when at last your reeling footsteps failed. And if the sky was darker than usual, it was only because of the rain which had begun falling early that morning and which had been falling steadily ever since.

Chris went into another bar, laid down his last quarter, and ordered wine. At first he did not see the man who came in a moment later and stood beside him. There was a raging rawness in him such as even he had never known before, and the wine he had thus far drunk had merely served to aggravate it. Eagerly he drained the glass which the bartender filled and set before him. Reluctantly he turned to leave. He saw the man then.

The man was gaunt—so gaunt that he seemed taller than he actually was. His thin-featured face was pale, and his dark eyes seemed beset by unimaginable pain. His hair was brown and badly in need of cutting. There was a strange statuesqueness about him—an odd sense of immobility. Raindrops iridesced like tiny jewels on his gray trench coat, dripped sporadically from his black hat. “Good evening,” he said. “May I offer you a drink?”

For an agonizing moment Chris saw himself through the other’s eyes—saw his thin, sensitive face with its intricate networks of ruptured capillaries; his gray rain-plastered hair; his ragged rain-soaked overcoat; his cracked rain-sodden shoes—and the image was so vivid that it shocked him into speechlessness. But only briefly; then the rawness intervened. “Sure I’ll have a drink,” he said, and tapped his glass upon the bar.

“Not here,” the gaunt man said. “Come with me.”

Chris followed him out into the rain, the rawness rampant now. He staggered, and the gaunt man took his arm. “It’s only a little way,” the gaunt man said. “Into this alley . . . now down this flight of stairs.”

It was a long gray room, damp and dimly lit. A gray-faced bartender stood statuesquely behind a deserted bar. When they entered he set two glasses on the bar and filled them from a dusty bottle. “How much?” the gaunt man asked.

“Thirty,” the bartender answered.

The gaunt man counted out the money. “I shouldn’t have asked,” he said. “It’s always thirty—no matter where I go. Thirty this, or thirty that; thirty days or thirty months or thirty thousand years.” He raised his glass and touched it to his lips.

Chris followed suit, the rawness in him screaming. The glass was so cold that it numbed his fingertips, and its contents had a strange Cimmerian cast. But the truth didn’t strike him till he tilted the glass and drained the darkness; then the quatrain came down from the attic of his mind where he had stored it years ago, and he knew suddenly who the gaunt man was.

So when at last the Angel of the Drink

Of Darkness finds you by the

river-brink,

And, proffering his Cup, invites your

Soul

Forth to your Lips to quaff it—do not

shrink.

But by then the icy waves were washing through him, and soon the darkness was complete.

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Dead! The word was a hoarse and hideous echo caroming down the twisted corridor of his mind. He heard it again and again and again—dead . . . dead . . . dead—till finally he realized that the source of it was himself and that his eyes were tightly closed. Opening them, he saw a vast starlit plain and a distant shining mountain. He closed them again, more tightly than before.

“Open your eyes,” the gaunt man said. “We’ve a long way to go.”

Reluctantly, Chris obeyed. The gaunt man was standing a few feet away, staring hungrily at the shining mountain. “Where are we?” Chris asked. “In God’s name, where are we?!”

The gaunt man ignored the question. “Follow me,” he said and set off toward the mountain.

Numbly, Chris followed. He sensed coldness all around him but he could not feel it, nor could he see his breath. A shudder racked him. Of course he couldn’t see his breath—he had no breath to see. Any more than the gaunt man did.

The plain shimmered, became a playground, then a lake, then a foxhole, finally a summer street. Wonderingly he identified each place. The playground was the one where he had played as a boy. The lake was the one he had fished in as a young man. The foxhole was the one he had bled and nearly died in. The summer street was the one he had driven down on his way to his first postwar job. He returned to each place—played, fished, swam, bled, drove. In each case it was like living each moment all over again.

Was it possible, in death, to control time and relive the past?

He would try. The past was definitely preferable to the present. But to which moment did he wish to return? Why, to the most precious one of all, of course—to the one in which he had met Laura.Laura , he thought, fighting his way back through the hours, the months, the years. “Laura!” he cried out in the cold and starlit reaches of the night.

And the plain became a sun-filled street.

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He and Minelli had come off guard duty that noon and had gone into the Falls on a twelve-hour pass. It was a golden October day early in the war, and they had just completed their basic training. Recently each of them had made corporal, and they wore their chevrons in their eyes as well as on their sleeves.

The two girls were sitting at a booth in a crowded bar, sipping ginger ale. Minelli had made the advances, concentrating on the tall dark-haired one. Chris had lingered in the background. He sort of liked the dark-haired girl, but the round-faced blonde who was with her simply wasn’t his cup of tea, and he kept wishing Minelli would give up and come back to the bar and finish his beer so they could leave.

Minelli did nothing of the sort. He went right on talking to the tall girl, and presently he managed to edge his stocky body into the seat beside her. There was nothing for it then, and when Minelli beckoned to him Chris went over and joined them. The round-faced girl’s name was Patricia and the tall one’s name was Laura.

They went for a walk, the four of them. They watched the American Falls for a while and afterward they visited Goat Island. Laura was several inches taller than Minelli, and her thinness made her seem even taller. They made a rather incongruous couple. Minelli didn’t seem to mind, but Laura seemed ill at ease and kept glancing over her shoulder at Chris.

Finally, she and Pat had insisted that it was time for them to go home—they were staying at a modest boarding house just off the main drag, taking in the Falls over the weekend—and Chris had thought, Good, now at last we’ll be rid of them. Guard duty always wore him out—he had never been able to adapt himself to the two-hours-on, two-hours-off routine—and he was tired. But Minelli went right on talking after they reached the boarding house, and presently the two girls agreed to go out to supper. Minelli and Chris waited on the porch while they went in and freshened up. When they came out Laura stepped quickly over to Chris’s side and took his arm.

He was startled for a moment, but he recovered swiftly, and soon he and Laura were walking hand in hand down the street. Minelli and Pat fell in behind them. “It’s all right, isn’t it?” Laura whispered in his ear. “I’d much rather go with you.”

“Sure,” he said, “it’s fine.”

And it was, too. He wasn’t tired anymore and there was a pleasant warmth washing through him. Glancing sideways at her profile, he saw that her face wasn’t quite as thin as he had at first thought, and that her nose was tilted just enough to give her features a piquant cast.

Supper over, the four of them revisited the American Falls. Twilight deepened into darkness and the stars came out. Chris and Laura found a secluded bench and sat in the darkness, shoulders touching, listening to the steady thunder of the cataract. The air was chill, and permeated with ice-cold particles of spray. He put his arm around her, wondering if she was as cold as he was; apparently she was, for she snuggled up close to him. He turned and kissed her then, softly, gently, on the lips; it wasn’t much of a kiss, but he knew somehow that he would never forget it. He kissed her once more when they said good night on the boarding house porch. She gave him her address.

“Yes,” he whispered, “I’ll write.”

“And I’ll write too,” she whispered back in the cool damp darkness of the night. “I’ll write you every day.”

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Every day, said the plain. Every day , pulsed the stars. I’ll write you every day.

And she had, too, he remembered, plodding grimly in the gaunt man’s wake. His letters from her were legion, and so were her letters from him. They had gotten married a week before he went overseas, and she had waited through the unreal years for him to come back, and all the while they had written, written, written—Dearest ChrisandDearest Laura , and words, words, words. Getting off the bus in the little town where she lived, he had cried when he had seen her standing in the station doorway, and she had cried too; and the years of want and of waiting had woven themselves into a golden moment—and now the moment was shreds.

Shreds, said the plain. Shreds , pulsed the stars. The golden moment is shreds. . . .

The past is a street lined with hours, he thought, and I am walking down the street and I can open the door of any hour I choose and go inside. It is a dead man’s privilege, or perhaps a dead man’s curse—for what good are hours now?

The next door he opened led into Ernie’s place, and he went inside and drank a beer he had ordered fourteen years ago.

“How’s Laura?” Ernie asked.

“Fine,” he said.

“And Little Chris?”

“Oh, he’s fine too. Hell be a whole year old next month.”

He opened another door and went over to where Laura was standing before the kitchen stove and kissed her on the back of the neck. “Watch out!” she cried in mock distress. “You almost made me spill the gravy.”

He opened another door—Ernie’s place again. He closed it quickly. He opened another—and found himself in a bar full of squealing people. Streamers drifted down around him, streamers and multicolored balloons. He burst a balloon with his cigarette and waved his glass. “Happy New Year!” he shouted. “Happy New Year!” Laura was sitting at a corner table, a distressed look on her face. He went over and seized her arm and pulled her to her feet. “It’s all right, don’t you see?” he said. “It’s New Year’s Eve. If a man can’t let himself go on New Year’s Eve, when can he let himself go?”

“But, darling, you said—”

“I said I’d quit—and I will, too—starting tomorrow.” He weaved around in a fantastic little circle that somehow brought him back to her side. “Happy New Year, baby—Happy New Year!”

“Happy New Year, darling,” she said, and kissed him on the cheek. He saw then that she was crying.

He ran from the room and out into the Cimmerian night. Happy New Year , the plain said. Happy New Year , pulsed the stars. Should auld acquaintance be forgot, and never brought to mind . . . The gaunt man still strode relentlessly ahead, and now the shining mountain occulted half the sky. Desperately, Chris threw open another door.

He was sitting in an office. Across the desk from him sat a gray-haired man in a white coat. “Look at it this way,” the gray-haired man was saying. “You’ve just recovered from a long bout with a disease to which you are extremely susceptible, and because you are extremely susceptible to it, you must sedulously avoid any and all contact with the virus that causes it. You have a low alcoholic threshold, Chris, and consequently you are even more at the mercy of that ‘first drink’ than the average periodic drinker. Moreover, your alternate personality—your ‘alcoholic alter ego’—is virtually the diametric opposite of your real self, and hence all the more incompatible with reality. It has already behaved in ways your real self would not dream of behaving, and at this point it is capable of behavior patterns so contrary to your normal behavior patterns that it could disrupt your whole life. Therefore, I beg you, Chris, not to unleash it. And now, goodbye and good luck. I am happy that our institution could be of such great help to you.”

He knew the hour that lay behind the next door, and it was an hour which he did not care to relive. But the door opened of its own accord, and despite himself he stepped across the dark threshold of the years. . . .

He and Laura were carrying Friday-night groceries from the car into the house. It was summer, and stars glistened gently in the velvet-soft sky. He was tired, as was to be expected at the end of the week, but he was taut, too—unbearably taut from three months of teetotalism. And Friday nights were the worst of all; he had always spent his Friday nights at Ernie’s, and while part of his mind remembered how poignantly he had regretted them the next day, the rest of his mind insisted on dwelling on the euphoria they had briefly brought him—even though it knew as well as the other part did that the euphoria had been little more than a profound and gross feeling of animal relaxation.

The bag of potatoes he was carrying burst open, and potatoes bounced and rolled all over the patio. “Damn!” be said, and knelt down and began picking them up. One of them slipped from his fingers and rolled perversely off the patio and down the walk, and he followed it angrily, peevishly determined that it should not get away. It glanced off one of the wheels of Little Chris’s tricycle and rolled under the back porch. When he reached in after it his fingers touched a cold curved smoothness, and with a start he remembered the bottle of whiskey he had hidden the previous spring after coming home from a Saturday-night drunk—hidden and forgotten about till now.

Slowly he withdrew it. Starlight caught it, and it gleamed softly in the darkness. He knelt there, staring at it, the chill dampness of the ground creeping up into his knees. What harm can one drink do? his tautness asked. One drink stolen in the darkness, and then no more?

No, he answered. Never. Yes , the tautness screamed. Just one. A sip. A swallow. Hurry! If it wasn’t meant to be, the bag would not have burst. His fingers wrenched off the cap of their own volition then, and he raised the bottle to his lips. . . .

When he returned to the patio Laura was standing in the doorway, her tall slenderness silhouetted softly against the living-room light. He knelt down and resumed picking up the potatoes, and, perceiving what had happened, she came out, laughing, and helped him. Afterward she went down the street to her sister’s to pick up Little Chris. By the time she got back, the bottle was half empty and the tautness was no more.

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He waited till she took Little Chris upstairs to put him to bed, then he got in the car and drove downtown. He went to Ernie’s. “Hi, Chris,” Ernie said, surprised. “What’ll it be?”

“Shot and a beer,” he said. He noticed the girl at the end of the bar then. She was a tall blonde with eyes like blue mountain lakes. She returned his gaze coolly, calculatingly. The whiskey he had already drunk had made him tall; the boilermaker made him even taller. He walked down to the end of the bar and slipped onto the stool beside her. “Have a drink with me?” he asked.

“Sure,” she said, “why not?”

He had one too, soaring now after the earthbound months on ginger ale, all the accumulated drives finding vent as his inhibitions dropped away and his drunken alter ego stepped up on the stage. Tomorrow he would hate what he was tonight, but tonight he loved what he was. Tonight he was a god, leaping upon the mountains, skipping upon the hills. He took the blonde to her apartment and stayed the night, and went home in the small hours, reeking of cheap perfume. When he saw Laura’s face the next morning he wanted to kill himself, and if it hadn’t been for the half-full bottle under the porch, he would have. But the bottle saved him, and he was off again.

It was quite a spree. To finance it, he sold his car, and weeks later, he and the blonde wound up in a cheap rooming house in Kalamazoo. She stayed around long enough to help him drink up his last dollar, and then took off. He never went back to Laura. Before, when he had walked down Fool’s Street, it had been the booze and the booze alone, and afterward he had been able to face her. But he could not face her now—not Laura of the tender smile, the gentle eyes. Hurting her was one thing; destroying her, quite another.

No, he had not gone back; he had accepted Fool’s Street as his destiny, and gone on walking down it through the years, and the years had not been kind. The past was not preferable to the present after all.

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The shining mountain loomed death-tall against the star-flecked sky. He could face it now, whatever it was meant to be; but there was still one more door to open, one final bitter swallow remaining in the cup. Grimly he stepped back across the bottomless abyss of time to the little tavern on School Street and finished the glass of muscatel he had bought six years ago. Then he walked over to the window and stood looking out into the street.

He stood there for some time, watching the kids go by on their way home from school, and after a while the boy with Laura’s eyes came into view. His throat constricted then, and the street swam slightly out of focus; but he went on watching, and presently the boy was abreast of the window, chatting gaily with his companions and swinging his books; now past the window and disappearing from view. For a moment he almost ran outside and shouted,Chris, remember me?— and then, by the grace of God, his eyes dropped to his cracked shoes and his mind remembered his seedy suit and the wine-sour smell of his breath, and he shrank back into the shadows of the room.

On the plain again, he shouted, “Why didn’t you come sooner, Mr. Death? Why didn’t you come six years ago? That was when I really died!”

The gaunt man had halted at the base of the shining mountain and was staring up at the snow-white slopes. His very aspect expressed yearning, and when he turned, the yearning lingered in his eyes. “I am not death,” he said.

“Who are you, then?” Chris asked. “And where are we going?”

“We are not going anywhere. From this point you must proceed alone. I cannot climb the mountain; it’s forbidden me.”

“But why must I climb the mountain?”

“You do not have to—but you will. You will climb it because it is death. The plain you have just crossed and upon which you still stand represents the transition from life to death. You repeatedly returned to moments in your past because the present, except in a symbolic sense, no longer exists for you. If you do not climb it, you will keep returning to those moments.”

“What will I find on the mountain?”

“I do not know. But this much I do know: Whatever you find there will be more merciful than what you have found—or will ever find—on the plain.”

“Who are you?”

The gaunt man looked out over the plain. His shoulders sagged, as though a great weight lay upon them. “There is no word for what I am,” he said presently. “Call me a wanderer, if you like—a wanderer condemned to walk the plain forever; a wanderer periodically compelled to return to life and seek out someone on the verge of death and die with him in the nearest halfway house and share his past with him and add his sufferings to my own. A wanderer of many languages and much lore, gleaned through the centuries; a wanderer who, by the very nature of my domain, can move at will through the past. . . . You know me very well.”

Chris gazed upon the thin-featured face. He looked into the pain-racked eyes. “No,” he said, “I do not know you.”

“You know me very well,” the gaunt man repeated. “But through words and pictures only, and a historian cannot accurately describe a man from hearsay, nor can an artist accurately depict a face he has never seen. But who I am should be of no concern to you. What should be of concern to you is whether or not there is a way for you to return to life.”

Hope pounded in Chris’s brain. “And is there? Is there a way?”

“Yes,” the gaunt man said, “there is. But very few men have ever traveled it successfully. The essence of the plain is the past, and therein lies its weakness. Right now you are capable of returning to any moment of your life; but unless you alter your past while doing so, the date of your death will remain unchanged.”

“I don’t understand,” Chris said.

“Each individual, during his life span,” the gaunt man went on, “arrives at a critical moment in which he must choose between two major alternatives. Oftentimes he is not aware of the importance of his choice, but whether he is aware or not, the alternative he chooses will arbitrarily determine the pattern which his future life will follow. Should this alternative precipitate his death, he should be able, once he is suspended in the past, to return to the moment and, merely by choosing the other alternative, postpone his death. But in order to do so he would have to know which moment to return to.”

“But I do know which moment,” Chris said hoarsely. “I—”

The gaunt man raised his hand. “I know you do—and having relived it with you, I do too. And the alternative you chose did precipitate your death: You died of acute alcoholism. But there is another consideration. Whenever anyone returns to the past he automatically loses his ‘memory’ of the future. You have already chosen the same alternative twice. If you return to the moment once more, won’t the result be the same? Won’t you betray yourself—and your wife and son—all over again?”

“But I can try,” Chris said. “And if I fail, I can try again.”

“Try then. But don’t hope too much. I know the critical moment in my past too, and I have returned to it again and again and again, not to postpone my death—it is far too late for that—but to free myself from the plain, and I have never succeeded in changing it one iota.” The gaunt man’s voice grew bitter. “But then, my moment and its consequences are firmly cemented in the minds of men. Your case is different. Go then. Try. Think of the hour, the scene, the way you felt; then open the door. This time I will not accompany you vicariously; I will go as myself. I will have no ‘memory’ of the future either; but if you interpret my presence in the same symbolic way you interpreted it before, I may be of help to you. I do not want your hell too; my own and those of the others is enough.”

The hour, the scene, the way he had felt. Dear God! . . .It is a summer night and above me stars lie softly on the dark velvet counterpane of the sky. I am driving my car into my driveway and my house is a light-warmed fortress in the night, secure stands my citadel beneath the stars and in the womb of it I will be safe—safe and warm and wanted. . . . I have driven my car into my driveway and my wife is sitting beside me in the soft summer darkness . . . and now I am helping her carry groceries into the house. My wife is tall and slender and dark of hair, and she has gentle eyes and a tender smile and much loveliness. . . . Soft is the night around us, compassionate are the stars, warm and secure is my house, my citadel, my soul . . .

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The bag of potatoes he was carrying burst open, and potatoes bounced and rolled all over the patio. “Damn!” he said, and knelt down and began picking them up. One of them slipped from his fingers and rolled perversely off the patio and down the walk, and he followed it angrily, peevishly determined that it should not get away. It glanced off one of the wheels of Little Chris’s tricycle and rolled under the back porch. When he reached in after it his fingers touched a cold curved smoothness, and with a start he remembered the bottle of whiskey he had hidden the previous spring after coming home from a Saturday-night drunk—hidden and forgotten about till now.

Slowly, he withdrew it. Starlight caught it, and it gleamed softly in the darkness. He knelt there, staring at it, the chill dampness of the ground creeping up into his knees. What harm can one drink do? his tautness asked. One drink stolen in the darkness, and then no more?

No, he answered. Never. Yes , the tautness screamed. Just one. A sip. A swallow. Hurry! If it wasn’t meant to be, the bag would not have burst. His fingers wrenched off the cap of their own volition then, and he raised the bottle to his lips.

And saw the man.

He was standing several yards away. Statuesque. Immobile. His thin-featured face was pale. His eyes were burning pits of pain. He said no word, but went on standing there, and presently an icy wind sprang up in the summer night and drove the warmth away before it. The words came tumbling down the attic stairs of Chris’s mind then and lined up on the threshold of his memory:

So when at last the Angel of the Drink

Of Darkness finds you by the

river-brink,

And, proffering his Cup, invites your

Soul

Forth to your Lips to quaff it—do not

shrink.

“No,” he cried, “not yet!” and emptied the bottle onto the ground and threw it into the darkness. When he looked again, the man had disappeared.

Shuddering, he stood up. The icy wind was gone, and the summer night was soft and warm around him. He walked down the walk on unsure feet and climbed the patio steps. Laura was standing there in the doorway, her tall slenderness silhouetted softly against the living-room light. Laura of the tender smile, the gentle eyes; a glass of loveliness standing on the lonely bar of night.

He drained the glass to the last drop, and the wine of her was sweet. When she saw the potatoes scattered on the patio and came out, laughing, to help him, he touched her arm. “No, not now,” he whispered, and drew her tightly against him and kissed her—not gently, the way he had kissed her at the Falls, but hard, hungrily, the way a husband kisses his wife when he realizes suddenly how much he needs her.

After a while she leaned back and looked up into his eyes. She smiled her warm and tender smile. “I guess the potatoes can wait at that,” she said.

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The gaunt man stepped back across the abysmal reaches of the years and resumed his eternal wandering beneath the cold and silent stars. His success heartened him; perhaps, if he tried once more, he could alter his own moment too.

Think of the hour, the scene, the way you felt; then open the door. . . .It is spring and I am walking through narrow twisting streets. Above me stars shine gently in the dark and mysterious pastures of the night. It is spring and a warm wind is blowing in from the fields and bearing with it the scent of growing things. I can smell matzoth baking in earthen ovens. . . . Now the temple looms before me and I go inside and wait beside a monolithic table. . . . Now the high priest is approaching. . . .

The high priest upended the leather bag he was carrying and spilled its gleaming contents on the table. “Count them,” he said.

He did so, his fingers trembling. Each piece made a clinking sound when he dropped it into the bag. Clink . . . clink . . . clink. When the final clink sounded he closed the bag and thrust it beneath his robe.

“Thirty?” the high priest asked.

“Yes. Thirty.”

“It is agreed then?”

For the hundredth, the thousandth, the millionth time, he nodded. “Yes,” he said, “it is agreed. Come, I will take you to him, and I will kiss his cheek so that you will know him. He is in a garden just outside the city—a garden named Gethsemane.”