Through A Glass, Greenly

Roger Zelazny

“Where did you ever get it, Lundy?” I asked, holding it up to the light and staring through at his green-infused face.

He smiled that superior smile that every wine snob displays to a true connoisseur, when he thinks he has surpassed him.

“Oh, I managed to find three bottles in an old cellar in Jamaica,” he flipped his hand casually. “I brought it back disguised as crème de menthe.”

I luxuriated in its deep emerald soul, it was like the doorway to a wicked world through which I need but step to enter into the presence of Arthur Symonds and Paul Verlaine.

I sniffed it.

“One doesn’t just drink it that way,” he sighed.

“I have drunk absinthe before,” I stated.

“Pernod,” he interrupted.

“No, absinthe! And I know how it is to be treated.”

Of course I lied, but one never admits these things to wine snobs.

He produced two screens of silver mesh and placed them across the tops of the glasses.

“Very well, you prepare them.”

It wasn’t hard to do. I had at least read of the ritual, and I knew he had never seen it. So I placed a cube of sugar on each screen and delicately tipped the decanter above them.

“Very well done, Duncan.” He gnashed his teeth as the sugar dripped through and clouded the green.

“To the Nouvelle Athenes,” I saluted, raising my glass.

“Verily,” he agreed.

It had an awful taste to it, but I forced myself to smile and nod sagely.

“Wonderful!” I sighed. “Fine and grand! You wouldn’t consider selling me a bottle, would you?”

“I’m afraid not.”

“I didn’t think so,” I answered, “I didn’t think so.”

“However,” he said, “if you’ll come to the costume party this evening, you can drink it all night.”

“I’ll be there with bells on.”

“I should hope so. It’s a costume party.”

I knew that, so for the sake of good humor I did wear bells, on my cap. I went as a court jester.

\* \* \*

I was being bored by an ivy-cut sophomore who wanted the U. N. to promote Pound’s theory of money on a worldwide scale, when Lundy negotiated a corridor of cavaliers, courtesans, Falstaffs, and monks, pushing past the Charybdis and Scylla of a big-bellied banker named Gunson, and his friend, named something I couldn’t catch, and, shaking off their assaults, clutched at my sleeve.

“All right, old fellow. The time is nigh. Shall we wend our way to the cellar, bearing glasses?”

“Nothing could suit me better,” I jingled. “Excuse me, ivy-cut sophomore, who wants the U. N. to promote Pound’s theory of money.”

He sneered and I was gone.

Through the hustle and bustle of the Catskill Walpurgis of his garden, and into the mahogany and glass of his mighty hall, forsooth. Down then, down the winding rickety staircase that led from his great kitchen and into the purposefully musty cellars of his fame.

The Ghost of Christmas Past leered at me from behind a parcel of yuletide ornaments on a low table. We walked past the leaning tower of an ancient I-beam and negotiated a narrow passage beside the old furnace, which had stood in disuse since the shift to gas many years before. Squatting, we duck-walked under a brace of low pipes that clustered like mandragora-root at waist-height. Then a corner, a short passage, and another corner.

Then, the racks.

The monument of Lundy’s folly, the rows and rows of bottles sleeping, heads lowered, in aisles of cobwebbed silence, awaiting, through the darkness and the years, the palate of a man who could not tell one from the other.

Lundy moved the magic circle of his flashlight to a small table in the far corner.

Just like him to set up things so purposefully dramatic, so contrived...

He struck a match and lighted the candelabra that stood upon a broken barrel.

There were two bottles on the table. I set the glasses beside them. I turned back to Lundy.

His long, protruding fangs dripped upon the floor and he held a trowel in his right hand.

“My God! Lundy! What’s happened?”

“Nothing!” he cried. “Nothing—yet!”

He advanced toward me, pointing with his trowel.

“I’m going to wall you into that niche, you wine snob!”

There was a small opening in the wall behind me.

“But first, I’m going to enjoy the greatest drink of all—human blood! Your blood! I’m a vampire, and you are going to be my victim, because you are a fraud and a snob and do not really appreciate good things to drink.”

“No!” I said, and I hit him with a bottle from the rack.

He fell, and his upper plate slipped from his mouth.

“It was only a joke,” he mumbled, “only a joke.”

I hit him again, in the temple.

\* \* \*

He is still, so still, and the candles are low.

One is gone and one remains. I’ve finally developed a taste for the stuff. If I hold the bottle just right, he’s green from head to toe, and his fangs upon the floor.

I jingle my bells.

“You always were a phoney, Lundy. This stuff is too good for you.”

I pour another glass.

I think I can finish it all before he wakes up.

Notes

This is a pastiche of Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Cask of Amontillado.” Through a glass, greenly alludes to “through a glass, darkly” in the Bible (New Testament, 1 Corinthians:13); the line implies that humans have an imperfect perception of reality. The greenly refers to absinthe, a bitter licorice-flavored, green liqueur made from wormwood. The story mentions two nineteenth century poets who were fond of absinthe, Arthur Symonds and Paul Verlaine. Symonds wrote the poem “The Absinthe Drinker.” Pernod is a green, aromatic anise- and licorice-flavored liqueur. Ezra Pound was a poet who became infamous for his theories about money, usury, and the power of banks to create money out of nothing and control governments. Cavaliers are gentlemen, especially those escorting women of high social standing. Courtesans are prostitutes, especially those whose clients include royalty and men of high social standing. Falstaffs suggests fat, drunken buffoons similar to Sir John Falstaff in Shakespeare’s plays. In Greek mythology, Charybdis is a whirlpool and Scylla a perilous rock, between which it is difficult to journey. Catskill is a town in New York State located near the Catskill Mountains. Saint Walpurgis was an English missionary in Germany. Early Christians adapted an existing pagan spring rite on April 30 to honor her on May 1. (Walpurgisnacht, Walpurgis Night). The phrase Catskill Walpurgis was probably intended to mean something that is ostentatious but cheap. Forsooth means in truth. Mandragora root is the Mandrake root, considered magical because the root often resembles a human body.