

# *The Demon Drink*

*A Ghost Story*

*by*

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Don had a drink problem. Well, it was a problem for other people, not him! At least until the night he had more than his usual skinfull ....

Don Chadwick surfaced slowly, lazing in that hazy period between waking and sleeping. The thin bedroom curtains glowed with a faint shadowy brightness, a half-light which matched Don's present condition. He lay there for a while with something nagging at the back of his mind, something he felt he ought to remember, while waiting for the radio alarm to evict him from bed. Yes! It was Norman's wife's birthday! The security man at his office had been telling everybody all week that his wife was going to be sixty-five today, not that anyone really cared. No. That was not it. There was something else that he ought to remember. No, not something forgotten, more an awareness of something different. Last night? What had happened last night? Oh yes, he had thumped George in the nose. Well he had asked for it, with his veiled comments about Don's drinking and his wife leaving him for it. Don had been drunk, but no more than usual. Still *compos mentis* enough to recognise an insult when he heard one. Well, perhaps a little more drunk than usual, since he had gone from beer to shorts towards the end. But hangovers were a normal part of his way of life.

*'That's it!'* The radio switched on at the same instant as realisation dawned, and he hastily turned the volume down. He had no hangover this morning, which was extremely unusual considering the amount that he had quaffed. No wonder things felt different - it was a very long time since he had awakened so clear-headed. Why? He sat up in bed trying to recount the events of the previous evening. He remembered going into the Bull after work, with George, Andy and Pete. Then the girls had joined them - Liz and Jean, and later Jenny who always worked half-an-hour longer than the rest, tidying up and setting up for the next day. And without overtime. She was ok though, as long as the conversation was not about work. Once she started on that subject she became a real bore. They hadn't discussed work last night. Holidays were on the agenda, and where they were all going - all except Don. That was when George started the discussion that earned him a bloody nose. He had to ask Don if he would be going on holiday with Bett - knowing full well that Bett had left Don nine months ago. Don had ignored George initially, but as the evening wore on, and more beer and scotch were downed, George's casual remarks about Bett, and what a lovely girl she was, started getting under Don's skin. Just before eleven George, also well under the influence of alcohol, had been stupid enough to say how much he had admired Bett and how he wished he knew where she was. Don snapped, and before his scotch glass had hit the table, his other fist had hit George squarely in the nose, and there was blood everywhere. The barman had started heading towards Don, but Andy, who was still sober, dragged Don outside before he started a free-for-all. The girls had gone to George's aid, and Andy succeeded in getting Don to the car park. Then there was a blank. Perhaps he had passed out.

He sat on the bed wondering at the lack of hangover, the blank spot in his memory, and how he had succeeded in driving home. Then it hit him, with the full force of total recall. He was standing among the trees at the side of the road, looking at the wreck of his car. He remembered backing further into the trees as the flashing blue lights appeared, and watching as the ambulance and police screeched to a halt beside the wreck. He saw them trying to extricate the body from the car, and the blood on the inside of the windscreen glistening in the headlights and spotlights of the police car. Then he had panicked and run deeper into the wood. Another blank spot. He could not remember getting home or going to bed. He could not remember leaving the pub car park. Just the aftermath of the accident. He wondered what had happened. Obviously, Andy had insisted on driving since he was sober, and had somehow gone off the road into the tree.

He picked up the phone and dialed Andy's number. A recorded message invited him to leave a message. Andy had obviously been seriously hurt or he would have been there to answer the phone. He was surprised that the police hadn't called to ask questions, about his

ownership of the car at the least. He thought of phoning the hospital, and decided against it. After all, if they didn't think he was connected with the accident, why should he involve himself. And it was Andy who had been driving. He must have passed out in the car park, and Andy had decided to drive him home, away from the fracas at the pub. He touched his limbs gingerly, and was surprised to find that there was no pain. An examination revealed no bruises. Being unconscious, and relaxed, must have saved him. Perhaps Andy had put him in the back seat, he couldn't remember.

The radio switched itself off, jolting him into the realisation that an hour had passed. He would be late for work. What was he going to say about last night? He rushed into the bathroom and under the shower while trying to think of plausible explanations. He decided he did not know about Andy's accident. His brain feverishly working on alibis, he shaved while standing in the shower. He dressed hurriedly, finding the cleanest shirt in the washing basket. Leaving his shoe-laces undone he rushed to the front door, which was wide open. Andy must have forgotten to close it properly last night, after depositing Don inside. His neighbour Tom was in the front garden putting tea-leaves under the rose bushes.

'Morning Dave' he called as the front door slammed behind him. Tom glanced round, and returned to his task without returning the greeting. '*Probably mad at me for waking him up last night*' Don thought. '*I expect I was a bit rowdy. Stupid old bugger. I wonder if he ever got drunk when he was my age. Naw! He's too boring.*' And with this final thought Don strode out of his gate and headed towards work, about a mile away. Without the car, he was certainly going to be late.

He arrived at the small engineering company where he worked, taking care to sneak in by the side door in the engineering shop which connected with the small office block. As luck would have it, Norman was standing in a doorway in the corridor. 'Morning Norm' he said as cheerily as possible. Norm, who was looking back into office he was just about to leave, did not even notice him, and continued his conversation with the unseen person inside. 'Yep! The old girl's sixty-six today' he said proudly. *Sixty six I thought he said sixty five yesterday*' Don mused. Breathing a sigh of relief - he was about forty minutes late - he hurried into his office. Office! More a box room, with space for his drawing board, a small desk, and a computer on a separate stand. Hastily he shut the door, switched on the computer, hung up his jacket, and sat in front of the drawing board. Suddenly remembering the computer, he jumped up and went over to it. E-Mail. Meeting at 11am. Project progress and problems. He'd make more progress if there were fewer meetings! And there would be fewer problems if everybody didn't feel that they had to make improvements! He wondered if George would be there, and if anyone would ask about Andy. He went over his prepared answers carefully as he settled himself again at the drawing board.

He suddenly realised that he had been at the board for quite a while and checked his watch. Eleven fifteen! Late again. He was surprised that they hadn't sent that supercilious old secretary to remind him - she loved doing that. "Mr. Chadwick. Haven't you read your e-mail this morning? The meeting started *fifteen minutes ago*, and Mr. Evans would like to know if you intend to grace it with your presence.' Old bitch. Hiding behind Evans, who didn't like him anyway. Come to think of it, nobody did. Not even Andy who liked everybody, who simply tolerated him for purely Christian reasons. Sod them! Sod them all!

Racing down the corridor and up the stairs to the meeting room - boardroom they called it - he entered the office quietly. There was a vacant seat towards the bottom of the table and he seated himself as silently as possible. Dawkins was speaking directly to Evans and the rest of the meeting listening. Something about technology and upgrades being necessary if they were going to be able to compete successfully. He looked around the table and was relieved to find that George was not there. Probably too embarrassed to come in with a broken nose. Nobody looked around to acknowledge his presence, but, on the credit side, there were no caustic

comments either. He sat there listening to the conversation. Sometimes others joined in, but it was mainly between Evans and Dawkins. A debate about more computerisation, the cost and the benefits. 'Computers! Who needs them?' he thought, but wisely kept his thoughts to himself. Dawkins was the Technical Manager who also was responsible for IT, and Evans the Managing Director, who also controlled the purse strings. Family business, and Evans was family with a capital F. The meeting dragged on, and no questions were directed at him. 'Why should they want my opinion anyway, I'm just the draughtsman. The fact that I do all the research and design doesn't matter' he thought bitterly. Eventually, he heard Evans say 'It's settled then. Six more computers to be phased in over the next three months. If it aids productivity, then we will consider more, but not until then. Any questions?' There were none, and the meeting broke up. Don went through the door between two groups of managers. Both groups were discussing the proposed computerisation, and neither acknowledged him, even with sarcasm. The incident with George, who was fairly popular, had probably got around, and they were sending him to Coventry. It had happened before, and he had survived. Sod the whole bloody lot of them.

Back to the drawing board, literally, where he spent another hour working and fuming over his ill-treatment, then it was time for lunch. He walked to the Bull, knowing his colleagues would be there and would ignore him, but going anyhow out of sheer bloody-mindedness. He pushed through the swing doors and people glanced his way and then continued with their conversations. He saw a knot of his colleagues at one end of the bar, and deliberately walked to a point a few feet away from them, not looking at them at all. He stood at the bar waiting his turn, fiver in raised hand, while the barman served a group beside him. The group paid up, and Don called 'Pint of Best, please Dave'. The barman moved to another group, walking past him in the process. 'Pint of Best, Dave' he repeated. There was no response from the barman. George again! Bastard! He had asked for it, after all. Bastard! Now even Dave is giving me the cold shoulder. He stormed out of the pub, slamming the swing doors back much harder than was necessary.

It was too early to go back to work, and there wasn't another pub within walking distance. Still raging, he headed into the park. A long walk would help him cool off, even if he needed a drink. But that was out for now. Nothing would make him go back into that pub again. He'd bring some cans into work in future, and drink them in the park at lunchtime. So what if it was against the law? Let them try to stop him! He walked fast until the edge was taken off his anger, and then slowed his pace as he joined the path around the lake. Not entirely calm, but not mad anymore. It was all his wife's fault! Ex-wife, though not legally. Not yet. People didn't make problems for him when she was with him. They enjoyed boozey evenings with him, and nobody picked fights then. Until she started talking about his drinking. Before they were married she didn't mind at all. But once the ring was on her finger, she wanted him to change. Be respectable. Grow up. Come home sober. And started nagging him every time he had a beer, about his liver and his aggression. He hadn't been aggressive until she had started nagging him, had he? Maybe he *had* come home canned once in a while, falling about a bit, but most men did that too. Then she had started sleeping in the spare bedroom when he'd had a few, and locking the door from the inside. 'Disgusting', she had called his drinking, and 'why can't you be more like George and stop when you've had enough. Or hold your booze like he does?' That was when he had first belted her. Well, she had asked for it, hadn't she? She didn't try that again for a long time, and when she finally did he belted her again. He hadn't meant to break her nose, but his swing had gone wild. That was when his neighbours had stopped talking to him. The next time she had tried to lock herself into the spare bedroom he had blacked her eye. He wasn't going to allow any woman to dominate him, not him! Then she had left. He had come home late and gone to bed. She wasn't in the bedroom but he assumed she was in the other one, and was too drunk to make an issue of it.

Next morning he had discovered that all her clothes were gone. So had she. He had never found out where. Word got around, and fewer and fewer people would drink with him. Now George and Andy would probably drop him too. And Pete - 'Where was Pete today?', he thought as he suddenly recalled that Pete had not been at the meeting either.

He rounded the curve of the lake and saw a woman approaching with a dog on a lead. As he drew near the dog snarled and bared its' teeth. He continued walking and as he got nearer the snarls grew louder and more frenzied, and the dog started backing away from him. 'What' s wrong Frankie' said the woman, bending down to the dog but looking in his direction, ' calm down now.' She looked towards him again as the dog' s snarls developed into a frenzied whimper and the it backed away to the full extent of its' lead. Don walked on, looking behind curiously as he passed the dog. The woman was completely nonplussed, and continued to try to calm the animal. He walked on, coming to the wood he had hidden in the previous night. On impulse he thought ' Sod it. I' ve had enough for today. Sod ' em all, I' m going ~~hand~~' changed his course towards the wood. He wandered through the cool shadows for about ten minutes, and then saw the main road ahead. In the distance he could just make out his house, bathed in afternoon sunshine. As he approached the bands of sunlight across the house gave the impression of planks, as though the house had been boarded up. As the thought occurred to him he grinned wryly, thinking ' That' ll be the day. After the hard time I gave them three months ago, the council will think twice about re-possessing. But I' d better send them a bit more cash to save hassle.'

He was now within fifty yards of the house and instead of the illusion disappearing it appeared to become stronger. ' They couldn' t have thought. But it soon became apparent that someone had. ' The bastards. They must have waited for me to leave the house this morning. I' ll teach them to mess me about and he ran the last few yards to his house. It had been boarded up, but the boards across the door came away easily, some breaking as though they were rotten. The key turned in the lock and he stormed inside. Into the living room. In the gloom, by the few rays coming through the boarded up windows, he could just make out that the furniture had all been covered. He ripped off one cover, and nearly choked in the clouds of dust that rose from it. Coughing, he turned away from the dust, falling to his knees until the fit had passed. Facing him was the full length Victorian mirror, which his wife had not been able to take away. It too was covered in dust. ' How the hell did this happen? he thought confusedly ' I only left the house this morning' More carefully this time, he wiped the dust off the face of the mirror. His eyes had started accomodating to the gloom, and he saw more clearly now. But the mirror was still clouded. He wiped harder, leaning forward to breathe on it. As he wiped the mist away, he could clearly see the reflection of the wall behind him. But there was still something wrong with the mirror. He leaned forward again to inspect it again, his face inches from the surface. His reflection still did not appear in the mirror.

*And then it dawned.*

' That wasn' t Andy they pulled from the driving seat last night' he said out loud, his voice rising in terror until it became a scream.

' It was me'

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