



MODERN VICES ♦

The Green Fairy: The Rise and Fall of Absinthe

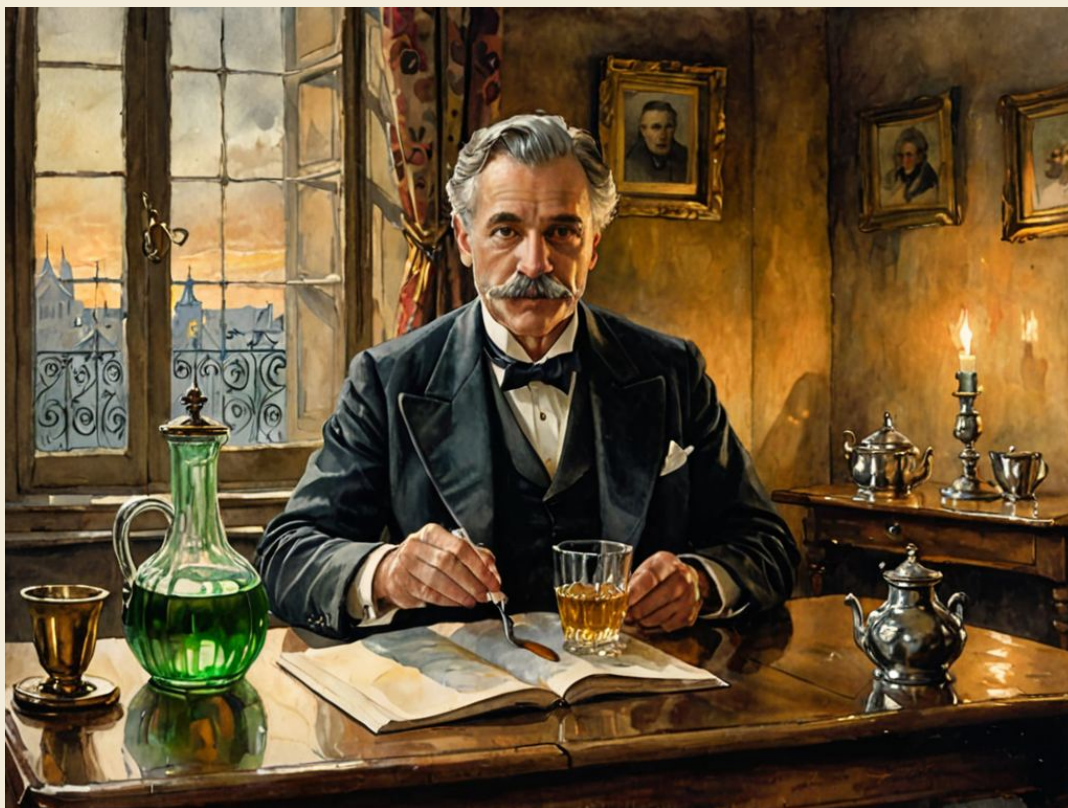
An AI Wrangler illustrated story



From the film

MARTY

Draw in close, friends, and let me pour you something out of the last century, a drink the color of a spring meadow that the poets called the Green Fairy, and the newspapers called a poison that drove men to madness and murder. Absinthe, Carol, was the most fashionable and the most feared drink in Europe, and its story is a perfect little lesson in how a whole society can lose its head over a single bottle. Tonight, the rise and fall of the Green Fairy.



CAROL

The Green Fairy. Marty, even the name is enchanting, half angel and half temptation. What exactly was this drink that everybody adored and everybody feared?



MARTY

It was a very strong spirit, Carol, flavored with a bouquet of herbs, chief among them the bitter little plant called wormwood, along with anise and fennel, which gave it that startling emerald color and a taste of black licorice. And it was potent, far stronger than wine, so strong you did not drink it straight. There was a whole lovely ritual to it. You would set a special slotted spoon across your glass, lay a sugar cube upon it, and drip cold water slowly over the sugar, and as the water fell the clear green liquor would cloud up into a beautiful milky, shifting swirl. Half the seduction of absinthe, Carol, was that little ceremony, watching the fairy appear in your glass.



CAROL

Oh, that is beautiful, Marty, the spoon and the sugar and the clouding green. I can see why it caught on. Who were the people falling under its spell?



MARTY

Everyone, in time, Carol, but it began with the artists and the poets of Paris, and that is where the legend was born. In the cafes of the eighteen hundreds the absinthe hour was sacred. Painters and writers drank it by the gallon, van Gogh and Toulouse-Lautrec, the poets Verlaine and Rimbaud, Oscar Wilde, all of them worshipping at the altar of the Green Fairy, all of them convinced she opened doors in the mind that ordinary drink could not. Wilde said a glass of absinthe was as poetical as anything in the world, and that after the first glass you see things as you wish they were, and after the second, things as they are not, and finally you see things as they really are, and that, he said, is the most horrible thing in the world.



CAROL

Things as they really are, the most horrible thing in the world. Marty, that is a chilling little joke, and it tells you these people half believed the drink was showing them visions. Was there any truth to that, the madness and the visions?



MARTY

Here is where the science and the panic part ways, Carol. The wormwood in absinthe contains a substance called thujone, and the belief took hold, fiercely, that thujone was a kind of poison that caused hallucinations, convulsions, and madness, that absinthe was fundamentally different and more dangerous than any other drink. Doctors wrote of a special disease, absinthism. But the truth, as we understand it now, is far more ordinary. There was only a tiny amount of thujone in the drink, not nearly enough to poison a man. What was driving people mad, Carol, was mostly the simple, brutal fact that absinthe was very, very strong alcohol, and they were drinking enormous quantities of it. The fairy's dark magic was mostly just the plain old ruin of drink, dressed up in green.



CAROL

So it was not some mystical poison at all, just a great deal of very strong liquor with a beautiful costume on. Marty, then how did it come to be banned, if it was no worse than the brandy on the next shelf?



MARTY

By one terrible crime and the panic that followed, Carol, and this is the hinge of the whole tale. In nineteen oh five, in Switzerland, a laborer named Jean Lanfray, a heavy drinker of everything under the sun, murdered his pregnant wife and his two little daughters in a drunken rage. Now, that morning the man had drunk wine and brandy in great quantity, and only two glasses of absinthe. But it was the absinthe that the newspapers seized upon. The Absinthe Murders, they screamed. It was the fashionable villain, the foreign, artistic, sinister drink, and the public terror that had been building for years finally boiled over. Never mind the bottles of wine and brandy. It must have been the Green Fairy.



CAROL

Two glasses of absinthe among all that other drink, and it takes the whole blame. Marty, that is the newspapers making a monster out of the most exotic suspect in the room, isn't it. What happened then?

MARTY

The bans came down like an avalanche, Carol. Switzerland outlawed absinthe. Then France, its very homeland, banned it in the middle of the First World War, partly out of the panic and partly because the wine growers, who resented the competition, were only too happy to help kill their green rival. Most of Europe and the United States followed. And just like that, within a few years, the most celebrated drink of a generation was gone, driven off the shelves and into memory, its cafes emptied, its ritual forgotten. The Green Fairy was exiled.

CAROL

Exiled on the strength of a panic and a grudge more than a fact. Marty, and did she ever come back, or is that the end of her?

MARTY

She came back, Carol, but it took most of a century. For nearly a hundred years absinthe was a forbidden legend, whispered about, smuggled, mythologized all

the more for being banned. And then, near the turn of our own century, scientists went back and actually measured the thujone in old bottles and in the traditional recipes, and found what we said, that there was never enough of it to harm anyone, that the whole poison scare had been a mistake and a moral panic. And so, one country at a time, the bans were quietly lifted, and today you may once again sit with a slotted spoon and a sugar cube and watch the Green Fairy cloud up green in your glass, no more dangerous, and no less, than any other strong drink.

CAROL

Vindicated at last, after a hundred years in exile for a crime she did not commit. Marty, there is something almost funny and almost sad in that. What is the meaning you take from the Green Fairy?

MARTY

This, Carol, and it is a different lesson from our gin tale, though they are cousins. Absinthe teaches us how a society picks its villains. There was real harm in it, yes, the harm of any strong drink taken to excess. But the world did not fear absinthe for what it actually did. It feared it for what it represented, the foreign, the bohemian, the artistic, the strange, and so it heaped upon this one green bottle all its anxieties and made a monster of it, while the wine and the brandy that did far more damage sat respectably on the shelf and were never blamed at all. Beware, Carol, the vice that gets punished not for its harm but for its strangeness, because the panic is often aimed at the wrong bottle entirely. I'm Marty Shepard.

CAROL

And I'm Carol, and tonight I am thinking of the poets and their emerald ritual, and how easy it is for a frightened world to blame the exotic stranger and let the familiar villain go free. Judge the harm, friends, not the costume. Come back to the fire.