

ABSINTHE – THE HELL-DRINK THAT CAN PUT YOU IN YOUR GRAVE¹

by HAL POLLING

It promised to be a run-of-the-mill experiment in a run-of-the-mill hospital lab, but what happened shook the crisp, whitecoated doctors out of their customary calm. Seated on one of the stiff brown office chairs was the volunteer subject, an interne built like an athlete, with reflexes as sharp as those of a jungle cat. Dr. R. had been selected for this experiment not only because of his perfect physical condition, but also that calm under stress which had caused his patients to affectionately nickname him "Dr. Schweitzer."

The experiment began when he drained a glass of pale green fluid. Within minutes he sank to the floor. His eyes became thin, blind slits, he failed to hear, his breath came in hoarse gasps, he foamed at the mouth, his arms and legs writhed uncontrollably. For all intents and purposes he was going through an epileptic fit. Stunned for a second, the doctors snapped into action. One injected a stimulant to bring the interne around to consciousness. Another pried his mouth open and poured down a quart of soapy water. After the torrent of vomit subsided, he swallowed an emulsive to dilute the effects of the fluid.

It took a few hours, but the interne came around.

Just what did the pale green fluid contain: Besides distilled water, only a half-ounce of oil of wormwood usually used in small doses to speed up heart action. Trouble starts once the dose passes the microscopic amounts used by doctors. At the very least, it causes sleepiness, but increase the amount, and the symptoms mount up: giddiness, dizziness, and finally the awful fits. Repeat the dose, over a prolonged period, and eventually the memory weakens, sometimes to the point of idiocy. A big enough habit can lead to paralysis and death.

And that's just what happened when oil of worm-wood was a popular drink-in the form of absinthe. In the 1890's, absinthe drinking amounted to a national pastime in Switzerland, France and Belgium. Just as Americans break for coffee in mid-afternoon, Parisians had an absinthe hour, an hour that began at four and stretched out a full 120 minutes until six.

Old, young, rich, poor, aristocrats, workers, educated, illiterate, all poured the vivid green liquor, drop by drop into a waiting glass of water where it became an opalescent delight. Old men drank absinthe to feel young. Mothers fed babies absinthe to make them strong. The wealthy merchant took his 160proof Swiss-quality absinthe at an elegant cafe, while the workman lined up at a zinc counter to put away his weaker, rotgut version. Safe alcohol or wood alcohol, high proof or low proof, absinthe was the drink.

It was easy to understand why. Absinthe had the virtues of availability, cheapness, pleasant taste (vaguely like licorice), and unbelievable potency. Three or four absinthes-and-water could knock a man out faster than ten shots of rye.

Exactly what was absinthe? Devotees of the drink as well as bistro owners and distillers, called it "the green fairy" or the "green muse of the poets." Absinthe's opponents, and these included doctors, labor leaders and churchmen, described absinthe as "the opium of our civilization" or the "the flail which killed more French soldiers in Africa than Arab bullets." One medico flatly stated, "Absinthe is as poisonous as belladonna, and it would be crazy to introduce it into the alimentary canal."

In plain fact, absinthe was an alcoholic infusion of a herbal hodgepodge. Among others it might include citronella, hyssop, angelica root, tansy, badiane, sweet flag, dittany leaves, fennel, mint, sweetbalm, coriander, peppermint and marjoram, besides the wormwood. When a man said he was drinking absinthe, all he knew for sure was that it was green, alcoholic and contained about 1/3 of 1 % of oil wormwood.

Some distillers, anxious to save a centime here or there, settled for what the hillbillies know best: wood alcohol. The color was often as phony as the alcohol. Spinach and parsley supplied greenness, and this was toned to the desired shade by burnt sugar. But there was more than one way to get the right color. Would-be chemists added a bit of copper sulphate and green aniline dye. Sadly, both copper sulphate and aniline dye are poisonous. But of all the ingredients in absinthe, wormwood had no substitute.

Wormwood got its name because originally the English thought it cured intestinal worms, but wormwood's history begins long before there was an England to give it a name. The Bible mentions wormwood, "He hath filled me with bitterness, He hath made me drunken with wormwood." (Lamentations III, 15). In ancient Greece, wormwood found favor with such physicians as Galen, Hippocrates and Pliny. Before the Spanish conquered Mexico, Aztec women wore garlands of wormwood flowers when they performed religious dances. During the Dark Ages, wormwood was a stock device for counteracting witchcraft and black magic.

Since wormwood grew at practically every English country doorstep, the practical English country folk fell back on wormwood to solve any and all health problems. An infusion of flowers and leaves served as a mild tonic, a peppier version fought intestinal worms, and a triple-strength potion went to work on fever and jaundice. Besides its use as a cure-all tonic, many people considered wormwood a staple ingredient in ales and wines. Nor was that all. As a final tribute to its powers; wormwood protected woolens against the clothing moth.

But it was in French-speaking countries, not England, that wormwood really came into its own.

It was tincture of absinthe - a medical way of saying the essence of wormwood in a solution of alcohol - that French army doctors took to North Africa in 1830. It's job: to reduce fever.

The situation was this: Soldiers stationed in Algeria could buy neither wine nor beer. The available water might quench the thirst but it left the digestive tract loaded with disease. To solve this problem, officers commanded the troops to add the tincture to their canteens as a kind of general disinfectant.

One mouthful of the tincture-plus water combo, and many soldiers retched. That was at first. Time brought a change in taste. French soldiers gradually came to look upon absinthe as a fine way to sharpen the appetite before facing bleak rations in a broiling desert.

In a second stage, the soldiers noticed that with enough absinthe, their morale improved. They felt better. They felt happy. More specifically, they felt drunk. Within three years - by the time the French had won control of Algeria - taste had gone through a complete turnabout. Absinthe was more than popular. It was an almost universal habit.

In January 1860, the crack First Dragoon Regiment suffered an epidemic of poisoning. Soldiers rolled in agony, racked by colic, diarrhea, vomiting. The army initiated a full-scale investigation. Its decision: absinthe was not to blame for the poisoning. No, it was the copper sulphate formed in the copper-lined canteens upon exposure to the absinthe. As for the many cases of delusional insanity, soldiers nicknamed it "le canard", and everyone shrugged it off as one more desert disease. Cleared of stigma, absinthe returned with the troops to the French mainland. Within short order, absinthe became a pick-me-up among civilians too. Its popularity skyrocketed.

To spur sales even more, distillers plastered French towns with posters assuring the public that absinthe was "healthful, beneficial, oxygenated." On the matter of healthfulness, advertising men and medical men stood far apart. All scientific research seemed to back up one point of view -absinthism was a grave disease infinitely more serious than garden variety alcoholism.

Symptoms alone were alarming. An initial exhilaration gave way to hallucinations, followed by a tremendously restless night broken by terrifying dreams. The morning after assumed colossal proportions -an overwhelming nausea and vomiting that didn't seem to stop. Hands trembled, the tongue felt thick, and besides the dizziness, there was the general, all around feeling best described as plain lousy.

That was after only one absinthe bout. If the habit was broken early in the game, the fits and frothings came to a screeching halt, but year-in, year-out use of absinthe left permanent damage. Habitual drinkers might go into delirium, feel the slightest twinge of pain, lose interest in sex, show a tremendous sensitivity to the slightest change in heat and cold. Some bad cases drank to the level of hopeless idiots. At the worst, absinthe drunks became paralysed and died.

Absinthe produced wrecks that were a breed apart. One solid French bourgeois family was ready to disown their son, an absinthe drinker from the time he was 16. Sobered up and in the hospital he protested to the doctor, "I never drink more than four or five absinthes a day, and as for the rest, what's the harm in a quart of wine?" The harm seemed apparent. From 20 he was subject to tics; his hands and shoulders shook uncontrollably. The merest slight sent him into a rage that ended in a wild fight. He complained of "fog before his eyes" while he was awake, but sleep was even worst torture - a time when he writhed, bit his tongue, urinated without check. Then came the absinthe bout that landed him in the hospital. He woke up with a headache, vomited bile, sweated rivers and complained of thirst. When the men in the white coats came for him, he shrieked over and over again, "The army's after me. "

"Nothing a long stay on the wagon won't cure," the examining doctor said.

Still another absinthe wreck turned up at the hospital with face twitching, lips frothing, arms and legs working uncontrollably. Hours later, he became violent, wailing, "Why don't you stop the assassins who pursue me!" and "I am surrounded by wild animals."

While alcohol alone can produce hallucinations, it took absinthe to cause frothing and the convulsions that looked so much like epilepsy that doctors labeled absinthe "epilepsy in a bottle."

Laboratory experiments on animals backed up the physicians in their doubt about absinthe. Once a dog got a shot of absinthe in its veins or even a good whiff of absinthe fumes, it went off into a typical fit. In another series of experiments, dogs fed a dose of absinthe over a period of weeks gradually lost interest in food and their weight dropped.

Scientists trying to explain absinthe's toxic effects found themselves in the kind of investigation that usually calls for a detective. It was a real whodunit. Exactly what element in absinthe caused the trouble?

Bistro owners believed there was nothing wrong with good absinthe. "Drink the real stuff, and there won't be any harm." These people blamed absinthe's bad effects on the copper sulphate salts which formed in the copper distilling vats. (Manufacturers rarely went to the trouble or the expense of cleaning out the vats or installing tin or enamel linings.) But when laboratory scientists distilled absinthe under ideal conditions and fed the products to the dogs, the same epileptic-like symptoms showed up.

Certainly, absinthe's alcohol content alone packed a punch. It ran from 96 to 162 proof. While alcohol played a role in causing the terrifying hallucinations and certainly pushed along the toxic action by slowing digestion of food, alone it could never produce fits. Scientists decided to look elsewhere.

They analyzed the herbal content. On the surface it seemed harmless. Why suspect balm mint that goes into eau de Cologne? Fennel root is used like celery in Italy, and the seeds make anisette. But when they ran experiments with extracts of these herbs, results knocked them for a loop.

Anise attacked the brain cells and knocked them cold - and so did angelica root, badiane and coriander. Nor was that all. Many of the herbs provoked fits. That was true of mint, sweet hyssop flowers, even the tansy that maiden aunts brewed into a tea.

But no matter what the ingredient and how powerful it might seem on its own, none had quite the toxic effect of wormwood. Scientists patiently injected each one of the extracts into animals used for the experiment. With each injection the animal became agitated and urinated, but only with wormwood itself did the animal show the typical convulsions.

All of which seemed to point to wormwood as the guilty ingredient but doctors came up against a puzzling fact. The active ingredient in wormwood was absinthin. When scientists worked with the pure, refined whitish powder, the typical fits just didn't occur. Obviously it wasn't the absinthin alone or the alcohol alone. What was it? The more scientists investigated, the more they came to believe that the harm came from the interaction between alcohol, the oil of wormwood, wood, the other assorted herbal extracts, and an ingredient that any right-minded Frenchman would have suspected from the start: water.

The customary method of drinking absinthe, was pouring it, drop by drop into a waiting glass of water. The opalescent liquid that formed was pretty to look at but deadly to drink. As an imperfect emulsion, it failed to dissolve many lethal chemicals. These were left free to attack the entire nervous system. An overweight person who overate just before taking absinthe was less vulnerable to its effects, but continued drinking of absinthe shrank the appetite and produced a thinner absinthe drinker, who in turn felt the effects more and so on - to the insane asylum or the grave.

Because absinthe was such a menace, the French Academy of Medicine suggested in 1900 that absinthe, alone of liquors, be put on the forbidden list. In doing so, they threw out names like scourge, plague; enemy, queen of poisons. Sticks and stones might have done more damage, for absinthe sales continued to rise and no legal action followed.

Nothing might have happened until an incident occurred that shocked all of Europe. In 1905, Jean Lafroy, a sturdy Swiss peasant, staggered home from the Commugny village tavern, and without any apparent motive, strangled his wife and two children. He had been under the influence of absinthe.

This brutal crime threw the townpeople of Commugny into panic, they bombarded the Vallis canton legislature with petitions until absinthe was banned in 1907. The same year, a French investigating team checking over 9,932 cases of insanity caused by alcohol found that absinthe figured in nearly half. The next year Switzerland outlawed absinthe sales throughout the country. The Italians followed suit in 1913.

As the years went by, French retailers and distillers of absinthe fought its prohibition, claiming that such a step was a prelude to total prohibition. But in 1915, as part of the war effort, the French government forbid the sale of absinthe and banned its use in the armed services. The government paid off absinthe distillers, and absinthe devotees learned they could get just as much kick and a lot less trouble from a variety of liquors that tasted like absinthe. Among them are Ricard's (made in Marseilles), Pernod (New Jersey), and Herbsaint (New Orleans).

Today, true absinthe is a rarity. While you may find a dusky beauty in New Orleans who assures you that "Daddy makes absinthe" and Swiss' innkeepers will say there's nothing like some home-brewed absinthe to beat the summer heat, absinthe is legally available only in England, Spain and Luxembourg. These countries clamp an iron hand on exports.

In any case, this is one more time the Greeks really had a word for it. Absinthe, that is. It means either "without sweetness" or "impossible to drink." The Greeks were right on both counts.

¹ I have made very occasional small changes to punctuation and paragraph formatting in the interests of intelligibility, but the sometimes idiosyncratic spelling used in the original article has generally been left unchanged, as have the various factual errors.