

Wormwood: A Drama of Paris
By Marie Corelli
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WORMWOOD: A DRAMA OF PARIS

By Marie Corelli (1855 – 1924)

Here is a brief summary of Marie Corelli's book, originally published in 1890 as an 800 page 3 volume 'triple-decker'.

Young Gaston Beauvais has a good job in his father's bank, and is handsome, well-bred and wealthy. He falls in love with Pauline de Charmilles, whose father is a Count and a friend of Gaston's father, and he asks her father for her hand in marriage. They become engaged.

Unfortunately Pauline falls in love with Silvion Guidel, a handsome and virtuous young man who is going to enter the priesthood. He is the nephew of Monsieur Vaudron, a much loved and respected old priest. Silvion loves Pauline too, and she begs Gaston to break off their engagement. Gaston is devastated.

Gaston runs into an acquaintance in park, a wretched artist named André Gessonex. It is a meeting that is going to change his life, because Gessonex introduces Gaston to absinthe:

"Do you like that stuff?" "Like it?" I love it! And you?" "I have never tasted it." "Never tasted it!" exclaimed Gessonex amazedly. "Mon Dieu! You, a born and bred Parisian, have never tasted absinthe?"

I smiled at his excitement. "Never! I have seen others drinking it often, - but I have not liked the look of it somehow. A repulsive colour to me, - that medicinal green!" He laughed a trifle nervously, and his hand trembled (...) "I hope you will not compel me to consider you a fool, Beauvais! What an idea that is of yours - 'medicinal green!' Think of melted emeralds instead. There, beside you, you have the most marvelous cordial in all the world, - drink and you will find your sorrows transmuted - yourself transformed! (...) Life without absinthe! - I cannot imagine it."

He raised his glass glimmering pallidly in the light, - his words, his manner, fascinated me, and a curious thrill ran through my veins. There was something spectral in his expression too, as though the skeleton of the man had become suddenly visible beneath its fleshly covering, - as though Death had for a moment peered through the veil of Life. I fixed my eyes doubtingly on the pale green liquid whose praises he thus sang - had it indeed such a potent charm?" "Again!" he whispered eagerly, with a strange smile. "Once again! It is like vengeance, - bitter at first, but sweet at last!"

Gaston finds himself coming to enjoy the taste, and he begins to be persuaded by Gessonex's speech:

"You mean to tell me" I asked incredulously, "that Absinthe, - which I have heard spoken of as the curse of Paris, - is a cure for all human ills?"

Things are going well, and Gessonex continues:

“the only good I can possibly do you in return for your many acts of friendship is to introduce you to the ‘Fairy with the Green Eyes’ – as this exquisite nectar has been poetically termed. It is a charming fairy! - one wave of the opal wand, and sorrow is conveniently guillotined!”

Gaston is now under the influence of the new substance:

I let him run on uninterruptedly, - I myself was too drowsily comfortable to speak. I watched the smoke of my cigarette curling up to the ceiling in little dusky wreaths, - they seemed to take phosphorescent gleams of colour as they twisted round and round and melted away. A magical period of sudden and complete repose had been granted to me...

Gessonex enquires if he is feeling better:

“The ‘green fairy’ has cured you of your mind’s distemper?” Yes, says Gaston, *“whatever was the matter with me, I am now quite myself again.”*

This is the cue for one of Gessonex’s great speeches:

“Good! I am glad of that! As for me, I am never myself, - I am always somebody else! Droll, is it not? The fact is” - and he lowered his voice to a confidential whisper – “I have had a singular experience in my life, - altogether rare and remarkable. I have killed myself and attended my own funeral! Yes, truly! Candles, priests, black draperies, well-fed long-tailed horses – toute la baraque, - no sparing of expense, you understand? My corpse was in an open shell – I have a curious objection to shut-up coffins – open to the night it lay, with the stars staring down upon it – it had a young face then, - and one might easily believe that it also had fine eyes. I chose white violets for the wreath just over the heart, - they are charming flowers, full of delicately suggestive odour, do you not find? – And the long procession to the grave was followed by the weeping crowds of Paris. ‘Dead!’ they cried. ‘Our Gessonex! The Raphael of France!’ Oh, it was a rare sight, mon ami! – Never was there such grief in a land before, - I wept myself in sympathy with my lamenting countrymen! I drew aside till all the flowers had been thrown into the open grave, - for I was the sexton, you must remember! – I waited till the cemetery was deserted and in darkness – and then I made haste to bury myself – piling the earth over my dead youth close and fast, leveling it well, and treading it down! The Raphael of France! – There he lay, I thought – and there he might remain, so far as I was concerned – he was only a genius, and as such was no earthly use to anybody.”

Gossonex is unmistakably insane:

...his voice had a strange piteous pathos in it mingled with scorn – and the intense light in his eyes deepened to a sort of fiery fury from which I involuntarily recoiled...

Eventually they part, and as Gessonex disappears around the corner, Gaston realises what has happened to him. He has become an *absintheur*.

I could have shouted aloud in the semi-delirium of feverish intoxication that burnt my brain!... my casual meeting with him had been foredoomed! – it had given the Devil time to do good work, - to consume virtue in a breath and conjure up vice from the dead ashes – to turn a feeling heart to stone – and to make of a man a friend!

This concludes the first volume.

Early in the second volume comes a quotation from Charles Cros which is pivotal for Gaston's motivation. Gaston's earlier sense of morality and decency is now, he says, not just diminished but "reversed" due to absinthe:

Glorious Absinthe! What is it the poet sings?-

*Avec l'absinthe, avec ce feu
On peut se divertir un peu
Jouer son role en quelque drame!*

With absinthe one can divert oneself a little, and play a role in a few dramas; this is going to be the rationale for Gaston's increasingly mad and callous behaviour. By now, he describes himself as a confirmed absintheur:

The action of absinthe cannot more be opposed that the action of morphia. Once absorbed into the blood, a clamorous and constant irritation is kept up throughout the system, - an irritation which can only be assuaged and pacified by fresh draughts of the ambrosial poison... I made my way down to the Boulevard Montmartre, where I entered one of the best and most brilliant cafes, and at once ordered the elixir that my very soul seemed athirst for! What a sense of tingling expectation quivered in my veins as I prepared the greenish opal mixture, whose magical influence pushed wide ajar the gates of dreamland! – with what lingering ecstasy I sipped to the uttermost dregs two full glasses of it, - enough, let me tell you, to unsteady a far more slow and stolid brain than mine! The sensations which followed me were both physically and mentally keener than on the previous evening, - and when I at last left the café and walked home at about midnight, my way was encompassed with the strangest enchantments. For example: there was no moon, and clouds were still hanging in the skies heavily enough to obscure all the stars, - yet, as I sauntered leisurely up the Champs Elysees, a bright green planet suddenly swung into dusky space, and showered its lustre full upon my path.

Its dazzling beams completely surrounded me, and made the wet leaves of the trees overhead shine like jewels; and I tranquilly watched the burning halo spreading about me in the fashion of a wide watery rim, knowing all the time that it was but an image of my fancy. Elixir vitae! – the secret so ardently sought for by philosophers and alchemists! – I had found it, even I! – I was as a god in the power I had obtained to create and enjoy the creations of my own fertile brain...

...we of Paris care nothing as to whether our thoughts run in wholesome or morbid channels so long as self indulgence is satiated. My thoughts, for instance, were poisoned, - but I was satisfied with their poisonous tendency!

Gaston's hallucinations continue as he reaches his front door:

I found the door draped with solemn black, as if for a funeral, and saw written across it in pale yet lustrous emerald scintillations – LA MORT HABITE ICI

Gaston has changed, so that good seems unnatural and absurd, and his former habits and ideas are completely reversed due to absinthe, as he explains:

Give me the fairest youth that ever gladdened his mother's heart, - let him be hero, saint, poet, whatever you will, - let me make of him an absintheur! - and from hero he shall change to coward, from saint to libertine, from poet to brute! You doubt me? Come then to Paris - study our present absinthe-drinking generation, absintheurs, - and then, - why then give glory to the English Darwin! For he was a wise man in his time, though in ability to look back, he perhaps lost the power to foresee. He traced, or thought he could trace, man's ascent from the monkey, - but he could not calculate man's descent to the monkey again. He did not study the Parisians closely enough for that!

Silvion has meanwhile joined the priesthood, so he is unable to marry Pauline, and Gaston offers to marry her after all.

"I know why you do it", says Pauline, - "for my father's sake - and for the sake of good M.Vaudron, - to save honour and prevent scandal".

Little does she know that Gaston is simply playing his role in a drama, after the fashion of Charles Cros.

He drinks *glass after glass* until he starts to hallucinate. The walls of his room seem to him like

transparent glass shot throughout with emerald flame. Surrounded on all sides by phantoms - beautiful, hideous, angelic, devilish - I reeled to my couch in a sort of walking swoon, conscious of strange sounds everywhere.

He feels himself divided into *two persons, who opposed each other in deadly combat*, and the next morning:

I was seized with a remarkable sensation, as though some great force were, so though speak, being hurled through me, compelling me to do strange deeds without clearly recognising their nature... I thought of that white half naked witch who had been my chief companion in the flying phantasmagoria of the past wild night. How swiftly she

*had led me into the forgotten abodes of the dead... Oh, she was a blithe brave phantom,
that Absinthe-witch of mine!*

At the altar he suddenly refuses to marry Pauline, publicly accusing her of being Silvion's cast-off mistress. Pauline collapses, but Gaston feels it all merely as a little drama:

*a curious scene, - quite stagey in fact, like a set from a romantic opera - I could have
laughed aloud.*

When Gaston meets his father in the street, Beauvais senior is disgusted by what Gaston has done to Pauline. A madman, he says, or "*a delirious absintheur... a beast*" might be capable of such callousness, but not a rational human being. Gaston doesn't let on his secret, but later he relishes his situation: instead of marrying Pauline,

*in my heart of hearts a wondrous wedlock was consummated, - an indissoluble union
with the fair wild Absinthe-witch of my dreams! - she and she alone should be part of
my flesh and blood from henceforth, I swore!*

Pauline has now gone missing, and her cousin Héloïse St.Cyr begs Gaston to help find her. Gaston then addresses his readers directly, believing they are secretly as selfish as he is:

*Let us then metaphorically shake hands upon our declared brotherhood, - for though you
may be, and no doubt are, highly respectable, while I am altogether disreputable -
though you may be everything that society approves while I am an absinthe-drinking
outcast from polite life, a skulking pariah of the slums and back streets of Paris, we are
both at one - yes, dear friend, I assure you, - entirely at one! - in the worship of Self!*

Pauline's father, the Count, summons Gaston. A servant shows Gaston to the Count's study, where the Count is sitting rigidly upright in an armchair. On the table is an open case of pistols, and Gaston realises that the Count intends to fight a duel with him. The Count seems to be looking at Gaston's with *old world dignity* and *speechless but majestic scorn*, when suddenly his jaw drops; he is already dead. Gaston's actions have effectively killed him, but,

my career was stainless, save for the green trail of the Absinthe-slime which no one saw.

He blames Pauline:

*I took a sort of grim and awful pleasure in regarding her as a paricide! From this period
I may begin to date my rapid downward career: a career which has nonetheless
brought to me, personally, the wildest and most unpurchasable varieties of pleasure.*

Gaston checks into an obscure hotel under a false name, in order to live out his new life to the full. When he goes walking around Paris he keeps to the back streets, not only to avoid a chance meeting with old acquaintances but because that is where he is most likely to find Pauline, now that she is disgraced.

On one of his walks by the Seine, Gaston sees a priest standing by the river, and he recognises him.

“You! – you!” he whispers choked with rage, *“Silvion Guidel!”*

Silvion is unaware of the terrible story; he thinks that Gaston and Pauline have married. Gaston fills him in: Pauline is on the streets, and her father is dead. Silvion reminds Gaston that Pauline never loved him, and Gaston attacks him, eventually strangling him after a fierce struggle and throwing his dead body into the river.

A week or so later, in a miserable back street, Gaston catches a glimpse of Pauline, but he loses her again. In the same district he suddenly hears a loud laugh; it is Gessonex, the madman, who lives in this slum:

with the oddest gestures of fantastic courtesy he invited me to follow him!

Gessonex's domestic arrangements are bizarre. He lives with a half-feral child who catches rats and eats them (Gessonex, in contrast, has reached a stage where he considers food *“a vulgar superfluity”*). The child, says Gessonex, is

“a production of absinthe...of Absinthe and Mania together”.

The child is the offspring of parents and grandparents degenerated by absinthe. Gessonex takes a scientific interest in him:

“I think I know now how we can physiologically resolve ourselves back to the primary Brute period, if we choose, - by living entirely on Absinthe!”

Gessonex shows Gaston his masterpiece – a painting of a priest breaking open a beautiful woman's coffin in despair – before suggesting that they should be doing something more *“amusing”*; they should visit the Paris morgue, which was a popular sight in those days:

“Because it is dusk, mon ami, - and because the charm of the electric light will give grace to the dead! If you have never been there at this hour, it will be a new experience for you, - really it is a most interesting study to any one of an artistic temperament! I prefer it to the theatre!”

The morgue-keeper thinks the priest is a suicide, but Gessonex, with his knowledge of anatomy, believes the priest to have been murdered. Gaston is understandably keen to change the subject, and when Gessonex makes a sketch of the dead priest, Gaston tears it into little pieces:

“I thought it was a bit of waste paper! Forgive me! – I often get frightfully abstracted every now and then, - ever since I took the drink absinthe!”

Gaston is further down the slippery slope in the third volume. Walking near the Avenue de l'Opera, he sees a ship being built and launched upon a green sea, only to break up and give way to a skeleton:

All the work of my Absinthe-witch! – her magic lantern of strange pictures was never exhausted!

People walking around under her influence are not uncommon in Paris:

There are plenty of people in the furia of Absinthe... men who would ensnare the merest child in mutilate her afterwards.

Gaston meets his father in the street again, and this time he tells him the truth, he is an *absintheur*. Beauvais senior is appalled:

*“You tell me you have become an absintheur, - do you know what that means?”
“I believe I do,” I replied indifferently. “It means, in the end, - death.”
“Oh, if it meant only death!” he exclaimed passionately... “But it means more than this – it means crime of the most revolting character – it means brutality, cruelty, apathy, sensuality, and mania! Have you realised the doom you create for yourself, or have you never thought thus far?”
“Mon Père, you excite yourself quite unnecessarily! (...) and even suppose I do become a maniac as you so amiably suggest I have heard that maniacs are really very enviable sort of people. They imagine themselves to be kings, emperors, popes, and what not, - it is just as agreeable an existence as any other, I should imagine!”
“Enough!” and my father fixed his eyes upon me... “I want to hear no more special pleading for the most degrading and loathsome vice of this our city and age”*

With that he removes Gaston from the bank, but Gaston is beyond caring.

“I hate all things honest! It is part of my new profession to do so” – and I laughed wildly – “Honesty is a mortal affront to an absintheur! – did you not know that? However, though the offence is great, I will not fight you for it – we will part friends! Adieu!”

Gaston's next encounter, while stirring his *emerald potion* in a café, is with Gessonex. Lifting his hat with a flourish, he glances appreciatively at Gaston's drink:

“The old cordial!” he said with a laugh. “With a blessed remedy for all the ills of life it is, to be sure! Almost as excellent as death, - only not quite so certain in its effects.”

Shortly after this Gessonex commits suicide, by shooting himself in the head. Alive he starved, but no sooner is he dead than he is acclaimed a great genius.

Gaston meets Héloïse St.Cyr, who is appalled at his condition. Too late she tells him that she was once in love with him, but that she feels nothing for him any longer. They talk of Pauline – *still missing* – her father – *dead* – and Silvion – *missing too*.

“What has become of him, do you think?” says Gaston suddenly – *“Perhaps he is dead?”*
“Perhaps” – he adds, beginning to laugh like a madman *“he is murdered! Have you ever thought of that?”*

Their eyes meet, and Héloïse cries out in horror before she turns and runs for her life.

Gaston is still obsessed with finding Pauline:

this was the only object apart from Absinthe which interested me in the least.

And one day he does find her, singing in the gutter with her hand outstretched for coins from passers-by. She tells him again of her pure love for Silvion Guidel, which goads Gaston to tell her what has become of him

“He is dead, I say! – stone dead! – who should know it better than I, seeing that I – murdered him!”

“What fools woman are!” says Gaston to himself.

A mere word! –... “Murder”, for example - a word of six letters, it has a ludicrously appalling affect on human nerves! On the silly Pauline it fell like a thunderbolt....

Pauline collapses and lies unconscious. And she lies there, Gaston is moved to kiss her. She recovers consciousness and starts screaming. Grabbing her, Gaston reiterates that he killed Silvion, forcing her to listen to the full story while she shudders and moans. Even as Gaston speaks, he is haunted by the pale phosphorescent apparition of Silvion creeping about: *“There he is!”* he says to Pauline. Suddenly Pauline breaks into a run, pursued by Gaston, until she reaches Pont Neuf. She dives off the parapet into the dark and swirling waters of the Seine.

“Pauline! Pauline!” Gaston cries into the waters – *“I loved you. You broke my heart! You ruined my life! You made me what I am! Pauline! Pauline! I loved you!”*

Gaston sinks into unconsciousness. Next day he wakes, still lying on Pont Neuf, and thinks back on the events of the night:

How strange it seemed! As the critics would say – how melodramatic!

Gaston’s thoughts are interrupted by the terrifying spectacle of a green-eyed leopard on the bridge, until he sees an early morning workman walk through it. Gaston gets up and walks, knowing that the phantom leopard is still behind him. Gessonex used to peer anxiously behind him, Gaston remembers,

and I idly wondered what sort of creature the Absinthe-fairy had sent to him so persistently that he should have seen no other way out of it but suicide.

Gaston has almost reached rock-bottom.

And here I am, an absintheur in the City of Absinthe, and glory is neither for me, nor for thee Paris, thou frivolous, godless, lascivious dominion of Sin!

Gaston haunts the Morgue, desperate to see Pauline again, and after two days her unidentified body is brought in. His first thought is that she must have a proper burial, but then he takes a perverse pleasure in the idea of her being thrown into the general pauper's grave.

The brain of a confirmed absintheur accepts the most fiendish idea as both beautiful and just. If you doubt what I say, make inquiries at any of the large lunatic asylums in France, - ask to be told some of the aberrations of absinthe-maniacs, who form the largest percentage of brains gone incurably wrong, - and you will hear enough to form material for a hundred worse histories than mine!

The mortuary keeper can see that Gaston is interested in this particular body, but Gaston denies knowing her: "*a fille de joie, no doubt!*" Suddenly he sees a pair of steadfast, sorrowful eyes *flash wondering reproach* at him. It is Heloise, come to claim her cousin. Gaston has been cheated of his vengeance.

What was there to do now? Nothing – but to drink Absinthe! With the death of Pauline every other definite object in living had ended. I cared for nobody; - while as far as my former place in society was concerned I had apparently left no blank.

Now, in the Père Lachaise cemetery, he watches Pauline's funeral from a distance:

I – I only had wrought all the misery on this once proud and now broken-down, bereaved family! - I – and Absinthe! If I had remained the same Gaston Beauvais that I once had been, - if on the night Pauline had made her wild confession of shame to me, I had listened to the voice of mercy in my heart – if I had never met Andre Gessonex... imagine! – so much hangs on an 'if'!

Night falls and Gaston is still hiding.

The guardians of Père-la-Chaise, patrolled the place as usual and locked the gates – but I was left for prisoner within, which was precisely what I desired. Once alone – all alone in the darkness of the night, I flung up my arms in delirious ecstasy – this City of the Dead

Was mine for the time! – mine, all these moulding corpses in the clay! I was sole ruler of this wide domain of graves! I rushed to the shut-up marble prison of Pauline – I threw myself on the ground before it, - I wept and raved and swore, and called her by every endearing name I could think of! – the awful silence maddened me! I beat at the iron grating with my fists till they bled; "Pauline!" I cried – "Pauline!"

By now Gaston can see,

fiery wheels in the air, - great, glittering birds of prey swooping down with talons outstretched to clutch at me, - whirlpools of green in the ground into which it seemed I must fall headlong as I walked.

Gaston feels the need to confess to a priest, and confesses all to Père Vaudron. Vaudron is driven half-mad by the revelation that Gaston has murdered his beloved nephew. Vaudron can offer him no forgiveness, but Gaston reminds him that he has to keep the secret of the confessional.

After another binge on absinthe, Gaston becomes so ill that a doctor is called. He tells him that his sufferings are due to absinthe:

"You must give it up", he said fiercely, "at once, - and for ever. It is a detestable habit, - a horrible craze of the Parisians. Who are positively deteriorating in blood and brain by reason of the their passion for this poison. What the next generation will be, I dread to think!" [...] "I must inform you that if you persist drinking absinthe you will become a hopeless maniac."

Gaston has one last hope. He remembers Héloïse St.Cyr. He will go to her, and ask her pity, and try to give up absinthe for her sake; only Héloïse can free him from the curse of absinthe. He goes to the St.Cyr mansion, but its aspect has changed. The doors are open and it is draped in black. Someone has died. It must be the old Comtesse, thinks Gaston initially, but the figure lying in the house chapel is Héloïse.

"Dead!" cries Gaston, "Dead! Groveling on the ground in wild agony, I clutched handfuls of flowers with which her funeral couch was strewn - I groaned - I sobbed - I raved! - I could have killed myself then in the furious frenzy of my honour and despair."

Gaston has lost everything. He kills his last vestiges of conscience and becomes wholly an absintheur:

Absintheur, pur et simple! - voila tout! I am a thing more abject than the lowest beggar that crawls through Paris whining for a sou! - I am a slinking, shuffling beast, half monkey, half man, whose aspect is so vile, whose body is so shaken with delirium, whose eyes are so murderous, that if you met me by chance in the day-time you would probably shriek for sheer alarm! But you will not see me thus - daylight and I are not friends. I have become like a bat or an owl in my hatred of the sun! -...At night I live;-at night I creep out with the other obscene things of Paris, and by my very presence, add fresh pollution to the moral poisons in the air! I gain pence by the by the meanest errands, - I help others to vice, - and whenever I have the opportunity, I draw down weak youths. Mothers' darlings, to the brink of ruin, and topple them over - if I can! [...] For twenty francs, I will murder or steal, - all true absintheurs are purchasable! For they are the degradation of Paris, - the canker of the city - the slaves of mean insatiable madness which nothing but death can cure.

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Finally another absinthe addict, a derelict chemist, gives Gaston a bottle of lethal poison in exchange for some absinthe – a *mere friendly exchange of poisons* – which Gaston intends to swallow as soon as he has summoned up the courage.

Finis.