

Le Péril Vert

By Mark Wardecker

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Very little illumination reached the alley from the street-lamp on Stanhope St., but it had been just enough for the constable to distinguish the spreading pool of blood from the puddles of creosote beside the carpenter's workshop. Turning, he swept his bull's-eye lantern across the width of the alley until its feeble beam alighted upon a pair of women's boots, and then, gradually, he raised the lamp, revealing the rest of the smiling corpse. For, in the dark and in the fog of a particularly humid summer night, it did appear as though the woman lying there in the sawdust was actually flashing a hideously wide grin at the constable so that the man had to take a few more steps into the alley before confirming that the cheerful countenance of the victim had been produced by a long, jagged gash carved across her throat. The sound of his whistle in that tiny alley was piercing and hurt his ears.

Soon, he was joined by more patrolmen and, despite the early hour of the morning, a small crowd of disheveled onlookers which his colleagues instinctively held at bay before the alley's entrance. The constable waited dutifully by the corpse, providing a source of light for the inspector and the local surgeon who had also arrived upon the scene and were now kneeling over the body. The doctor was a tall, lanky man who had to stoop much lower than the portly inspector beside him, and as he did so, his black bowler fell onto the sawdust, exposing his sleep-tousled, greying hair.

"Blast! As if being kept up half the night weren't enough. I'm through for now."

As he and the inspector stood up, the inspector brushed off the dusty hat with his hand before returning it and yelled, "Someone fetch a shutter! We're through!"

"It doesn't take a doctor to figure out the cause of death. Looks like yet another butcher with a taste for slags."

"Yes, inspector, but there's more to it than that. Do you think she was killed here?"

"The body could very well have been merely deposited here. The only footprints I can make out are old Johnson's, here. That and there's a rather trifling amount of blood for such a grievous wound."

"There's almost no blood at all, and the girl's white as a sheet. This corpse has been practically exsanguinated! With all the time in the world, I'd be hard pressed to make so clean a job of it, myself. But this girl's been dead no more than an hour, and her throat—this is hasty work. More torn than cut."

“No witnesses,” muttered the inspector as he exhaled a cloud of foul smelling smoke from a black cigar, “but an awful mess somewhere. . . . An awful, bloody mess.”

They stepped aside as two of the carpenter’s men placed the girl on a shutter and carried her to an awaiting dog-cart.

Earlier that day, while on his way home from the bank at which he worked, Liddle stopped before Tilbey’s shoe store in Harrington St. and opened the glass-paned door leading to the apartments above it. He then ascended a dingy, uncarpeted staircase, creaking with dilapidation and, upon reaching the first floor landing, approached the nearest door. After pausing to scan the business card which had been tacked there and read, “J.F. Finley, Artist,” he rolled his eyes and knocked. Not surprisingly, Finley was home and was soon waving Liddle toward one of a pair of wicker chairs in the flat’s sitting room. As his friend stood, pouring drinks at the sideboard, Liddle thought he looked even more pale and anemic than usual.

“So, still slumming in Camden, eh? I would have thought a painter would desire an apartment with better light, not to mention ventilation. Or does that conflict with your new-found, bohemian lifestyle?”

Finley smiled and handed his friend a glass of brandy.

“Some of us were meant for the pursuit of a life *close to the bone* and the rendering of all its beauties; others were meant to balance the columns of a ledger book. Cast down your green and envious eyes,” chided Finley as he took his seat in the remaining wicker chair.

“And what *beauties* have you been *rendering*, lately?”

“Do you remember the Haversham twins? Behold,” said Finley with mock solemnity and gestured to a canvas propped in the corner of the room.

“Oh Finley, they look like . . . Penkingese.”

“Believe me, I did them every courtesy,” chuckled Finley. “Even took them for walkies, afterwards.”

“Portraiture. Has it come to that, my *artiste manqué*?”

“It’s just to make ends meet while I pursue my more original work.”

“And where is that? I see your rendering of Chalk Farm along the wall there, but that’s hardly new.”

“I’ll admit, I’ve been feeling rather uninspired lately, Liddle, but I think I’ve hit upon a plan to change all that.”

“Perhaps getting a job and accruing some life experience?” suggested Liddle.

“No. Absinthe.”

“Excuse me?”

“My muse has fled, Liddle, and I must procure another—*La muse verte*, absinthe. My life has been devoid of inspiration . . . “

“And you think drinking green booze will help? Why don’t you just drink some of that stuff you use to clean your brushes?”

“I want to create a sensation, Liddle, like Degas when *L’Absinthe* was shown at Christie’s!”

“It was booed off the easel.”

“Be a sport. You, yourself, have professed a fondness for Verlaine and Rimbaud.”

“That’s different, Finley. The men you’ve mentioned *lived* their lives—they didn’t simply affect them. And they worked hard at developing their gifts and their craft.”

“But I’ve worked hard, as well. At the moment, I’m just lacking the imaginative impetus. You said I should accrue life experience. Well, here it is—this flat, this neighborhood, this . . . potion. I want to suffer for my art.”

“Yes, I suppose that’s preferable to your usual practice of inflicting it upon the innocent. Tell me, when did you formulate this plan?”

“That’s the strange thing about it. I was reading from *Romances sans paroles* the other day, and that’s when the idea struck me. Then, as if in answer to my thoughts, that very evening, the absinthe was delivered to my door.”

“By coincidence.”

“Quite.”

“That’s uncanny.”

“Indeed. You remember old Horseley, don’t you?”

“Yes. He had a fondness for one of his cousins. Had to go away for awhile.”

“He joined the French Foreign Legion. Just came back from Algeria and popped in for a visit.”

“Really, how’s his cousin?”

“It . . . didn’t come up, but when he found out I had moved to this apartment and had been earning my living at painting, he realized he had the perfect gift for me.”

“The absinthe.”

“A *case* of absinthe.”

“You don’t say. So how is old Horseley?”

“Very tan. You know it’s funny—he didn’t stay long, and I did most of the talking. I didn’t think much of it until now, but I don’t recall his even mentioning how long he would be in town.”

“Typically self-absorbed artist. And, speaking of art, that cousin of his would be the proper subject for a study. Can’t blame the man for the way he used to make eyes at her when we were together. . . . What’s wrong, Finley?”

At Liddle’s last remark, Finley’s expression had clouded.

“Liddle, do you recall the color of Horseley’s eyes?”

“Well, I can’t swear to it, but I think they were the average brown.”

“Yes. That’s what I thought, too. But when I last saw him, I couldn’t help but notice that they were a most striking green, almost luminous.”

“Oh well, perhaps we just never noticed.”

“Likely enough, but still . . . I usually remark things like that. No matter. Let’s break open a bottle and have a drink!”

“Not tonight, old friend. I’m having dinner with Evelyn.”

“Lucky dog. It’s the moustache—very becoming. I wish I could grow one and a full beard, as well.”

“Yes, then you could look your part, rather than merely acting it,” said Liddle as he rose and headed for the door. Before taking his leave, he turned, “You be careful, friend. This part of London is bad enough for a man of your stature. I don’t ever want to have to retrieve you from Limehouse or Whitechapel. Good luck, and may your muse be ever green!”

It seemed the long summer day had departed with his friend, so Finley lit the lamp on the end table between the wicker chairs. He then proceeded to draw the blinds on the windows, but left the sitting room and bedroom windows open, on account of the stuffiness of the tiny apartment.

Nunc est bibendum, he thought anxiously.

From his sideboard, he retrieved a bottle of absinthe and a glass. Finley was just on the verge of filling a small pitcher of water and grabbing some sugar cubes when he remembered that Verlaine took his absinthe green and decided he would do the same. Earlier, he had considered gathering his paints and brushes, in case he should find himself in the mood to work, but opted instead for a pencil and sketchpad. He was curious to observe the effects of the drink and felt that these would be enough, this first time, to capture any inspiration which might come his way, whether it present itself to him in words or in images. He laid his tools by his feet, and after sitting down, lifted the bottle from the end table and filled his glass.

Gently I wave the visible worlds away.

Initially, the concoction, apart from its licorice-like taste, seemed no different than any other liquor. Finley’s head swam pleasantly, and in the lamplight, his sitting room began to feel more cosy than stuffy. As he poured another glass, he even began to wonder if whether the drink’s reputation was based more upon the hyperbolic tendencies of the artists who swore by it than upon any actual chemical properties inherent in its composition. But then he became aware of a growing roar in his ears and a gentle rocking which seemed, like the noise, to emanate from within himself. With a slow and dreamlike regularity, he felt time’s dull waves advance upon him until, blinking dumbly, he could barely maintain his grip on the cigarette between his fingers. With each meeting of his eyelids, it grew harder to part them, and he felt less inclined to bother. In the gathering dark, he could hear a sound, a regular sound.

The beat of his heart? No, more like footfalls. The click of someone's footfalls in a long and empty corridor. He saw a point of light ahead, looming gradually larger. They must be his footfalls, but he was unaware of any sensation of motion. Neither could he tell how long it had been since he had reached the lighted space, a vast and rolling landscape, illumined by a viridescent light. He lingered there for what may have been a long time until it, too, began to grow dark. He waited in that dark, a silent, emerald dark where a warm and sticky dampness formed around him. Soon the footfalls resumed. Something fluttered in the distance, and he longed to turn around. Even when he was almost upon it, he could not make it out, but he was afraid and tried hard to turn away. At last, it was before him, and the footfalls were subsumed by the loud flutter of a torn and flapping canvas.

Finley sat bolt upright in his chair. The sun shone brightly against the blinds, and his lamp had long since ceased to smoke. As he wiped the drool from his chin and brushed the cigarette ash from his waistcoat, his attention was suddenly arrested. His paints and brushes lay scattered across his tiny table, and upon the easel was a canvas. It was one of the strangest paintings he had ever seen, but it was absolutely glorious! It depicted a row of dingy shops but suffused with the same verdant light of his dreams. Shot through the whole were splashes of red, in a strange but somehow familiar pattern, like dew on a web. His head throbbed and he had no recollection of doing it, but somehow he had fulfilled his ambition and infused the commonplace with a beauty unearthly and indescribable. The experiment had succeeded!

Later, as he was washing his face, he heard Liddle's familiar knock upon the door and rushed out to answer.

"So Finley, have you brought forth a *monumentum aere perennius* or just last night's supper? Are you alright, old man, you look positively wild?"

"Look at the easel."

Liddle entered the room and walked around the easel. As the canvas came into view, his jaw dropped, obliterating his smirk.

"My god, Finley, this is fantastic! I've never seen anything like it. How?"

"I'm not sure. I must have blacked out, and when I came to my senses, here it was, almost like it had been done by someone else."

"Incredible. A few more of those blackouts, and you'll be a very famous man. And you say you have no recollection, whatever, of painting it?"

"None. All I remember is sitting down on that chair and then waking upon it, nothing in between. In fact, I didn't even have any materials at hand."

"This is the point at which I should play the concerned friend and tell you to rein in. But my god, Finley. I mean, *my god!*"

"Don't worry. Hopefully, I still have enough new ideas to fill another canvas or two. I hope they last at least until I get rid of this headache, anyway! But you have to admit, that stuff really got the old juices flowing."

“I’ll say. And I’ll be able to tell everyone that I knew you when. Speaking of remembering, I came over here to ask you if you’d heard the news?”

“What news? Like I said, I just woke up.”

“Evidently, there’s another slasher on the loose. Killed a whore over on Stanhope St. I thought I could use the situation to entice you south, but after seeing your latest work . . .”

“I think I’d be better served by staying put. Look, I hate to be unsociable, but I should really clean myself up and get something to eat. See you later?”

“I’ll stop back at the end of the week to see if you can repeat your performance. Take care, and beware the Ripper!”

Having been unconscious most of the day, Finley feared that, when evening came around, he would be unable to sleep. But this fear proved baseless, and he awoke the next morning ready to work. As was typical for a somewhat creative individual, Finley often lacked the volition to embark on a new project, but as is also true to this type, once he had started, he found it difficult to cease, always sure that his next work would be better than the last. He also had a beginner’s selective memory, and it was only after he had stared at the blank canvas before him for well over an hour that he remembered just how difficult it could be to think of something to fill it. Resisting the urge to employ a found object or model, he tried to envision a cityscape like the one he had depicted the night before, and evinced a further characteristic of the novice: he worked entirely too long pursuing a false lead. If he could only find his scraper, he could probably, at the very least, recycle the canvas, but after half-an-hour of unsuccessful searching, he was forced to give up this pursuit, as well.

When there was no longer enough daylight for him to make out the lines in his sketchbook, he decided to repeat the previous night’s experiment. Worn down by his exertions, it did not take him quite as long to drift off this time. At one point, he even thought he had emerged from the darkness of his reverie and caught a glimpse of a shadowy figure at the easel, but that, too, quickly merged with his other dark fancies.

Just blocks away, Constable Drury spotted the inspector between patches of fog and scurried over to him. He and several constables were still standing beside the heap of blood-spattered bombazine where the victim lay, the second in as many days. She, too, had had her throat ripped out with very little mess to show for her trouble.

“I have a witness, sir! Saw a man fleeing from this direction not half-an-hour ago.”

“You don’t say? Lead on Drury!” and he followed the constable over to a neat, little man wearing a boater.

“Well, you see, sir, I was out getting a pack of cigarettes from D’Arcy’s shop in Stanhope St., there. No sooner had I rounded the corner into Mackworth St. when suddenly I saw him, barreling down on me.”

“Saw whom? What did he look like?” asked the inspector as he lit a cigar.

“He looked like a foreigner, tall and thin with a broad-brimmed hat and long, black coat . . . and he had a cane. I didn’t get a good look at his face. I thought for sure he was going to bowl me over into the street, but somehow, he just slipped past me. He had green eyes.”

“Did you see where he went?”

“No, sir. It’s so humid and foggy out, and like I said, he was all in black. Lost sight of him almost as soon as I turned around. It all took me completely by surprise.”

To his utter astonishment, once more, Finley, upon waking, was greeted by more than just a hangover, and once more, Liddle had dropped in just in time to share his surprise.

“I’ve done it, again, Liddle! Behold!”

It was another cityscape, just like the last but, somehow, even more ethereal looking. Behind the buildings and above them were the subtlest hints of even more divine vistas, all suffused with the same greenish glow and highlighted in red.

“It’s breathtaking, Finley.”

“Yes, I think I’m really on the verge of something. My *magnum opus*.”

“I know I’ve given you a hard time in the past, but I have to agree.

Nevertheless, you need to take care of yourself. You’re a mess and so is your flat.” Liddle sniffed at the air. “Have you left meat out?”

“No. And there’s no time for such trivialities. I must keep working. . . .” His eyes wandered to his first successful canvas.

“What is it?”

“Liddle, do the reds in that canvas look somewhat duller?”

“I’m not sure. It still looks quite stunning to me.”

“I’ll have to look at the tints. I wish I could remember what I used.”

“You mean to say you have no recollection of painting *either* canvas?”

“No. I must’ve blacked out again. I never was much of a drinker.”

“Finley, I’m worried. It’s obvious that you’re on the verge of something momentous, but perhaps you could abandon the absinthe.”

“Not yet. I’m *so* close to a masterpiece. I just need a little longer. It’s obviously a gradual process, a shifting of perspective. I’m sure that soon it will come naturally.”

“I hope so, because frankly, both you and your apartment are beginning to smell a bit *too* naturally,” chided Finley as he turned to leave. “By the way, you might want to lock your door this evening—there was another murder last night.”

“You don’t say?”

“Yes. A secretary got her throat slit just around the corner. They think it was done by the same one as killed that whore over in Stanhope St.”

“Then I doubt I’m the killer’s type, but I’ll keep the door locked, just the same.”

As he stepped into the street, Liddle thought for a moment about the smell in Finley’s flat and how odd it was that Finley’s two binges coincided with the murders. But then he remembered that, until two nights ago, his friend could barely execute a paint-by-numbers, and he left it at that.

This time Finley did not bother with eating or bathing. There was no time. The drink, alone, would be sufficient to revive him, and he was anxious to repeat the ritual, to repeat, and maybe even surpass his prior successes. Tarrying just long enough to place a fresh canvas upon his easel, he made sure everything would be at hand when the mood struck and was also careful not to drink too quickly, reasoning that, if perhaps he took his time, he might actually be able to remember and glean something from the experience. After pouring himself another glass, he stared fixedly at the burning lamp and allowed his mind to roam about the glowing world beneath its chimney. Flitting across incandescent fields, his fancy scouted, picked, and weighed the artistic matter all around it, searching for the spark to set the works in motion. And it searched until it found the darkness on the other side. Again, he heard the footfalls in the corridor, but there was no longer any hint of light, only menace and dismay. He had to return, retrace his steps, but the footfalls plodded on. In their thrall, he felt a sudden lightness grow within and knew his only hope lay in catching and rising with it. Terrified that it would pop, he rode the incorporeal buoy beneath him through the empty waves above until finally his eyes emerged from beneath their lids. Once more Finley found himself in his wicker chair, but he could not be certain that he did not still dream, for there was someone standing at his easel, applying crimson to the canvas with something other than a brush. Despite the heat, the intruder was clad in a long, black coat and broad-brimmed hat.

“Who are you?”

“Why Finley, don’t you know?” said the figure without turning.

“Who are you?” repeated Finley, meekly.

“I am *la fée verte*, the green-eyed monster. Finley, I am your *muse*,” said the mysterious figure as it slowly turned around and fixed its emerald gaze on the terrified artist.

“How did you get in here?”

As it approached, the green-faced figure nodded its head toward the bottle on the end table.

“Come now! Where did you come from?”

Again the figure nodded in the direction of the absinthe bottle.

“From there? You mean to tell me you popped out of a bottle?” said Finley as he tried clumsily to raise himself from his seat.

“In a sense. And please don’t get up—you’ve had quite a lot to drink,” warned the figure, allowing the light to catch the blade in its hand.

Noticing that the intruder was in possession of his canvas scraper, Finley sat still and looked up helplessly at his tormentor.

“You’ve heard of a djinn or genie haven’t you, Finley? Well, abracadabra, here I am.”

“From the bottle?”

“In a sense and at your behest.”

“But don’t genies grant wishes?”

“But I have,” said the figure and gestured toward the canvases. “Oh, don’t look so shocked. Did you really think *you* did these?”

“But why?”

“You desired a catalogue, a masterpiece, and immortality. I can give these to you and, while doing so, can attain the only thing *I* want: freedom.”

“No. This cannot be. I must still be hallucinating.”

“I assure you it’s no hallucination. I’m as real as you are. You have the canvases as proof . . . and then there are the bodies, of course.”

“That was you?”

“Oh yes, Finley, that was me. But cheer up! It wasn’t all just for fun; though, I assure you, it was *fun*. Think of it as insurance. Naturally, we can’t assure your immortality with just these three canvases. But throw in two grisly murders and a suicide . . .”

“Whose suicide?” cried Finley through chattering teeth.

“Yours, of course, but fear not—you will depart this earth like a glorious, falling star.”

“No! Please! You can’t!”

“But I can, Finley. I can. After all, as you well know, I’m the one who took Van Gogh’s ear and Rimbaud’s leg. By comparison, you are a small and trifling thing. It would never do for me to let you have the upper hand,” said the figure as it loomed over him.

“But why?”

“Because you flew too close to the sun, my little Icarus, *brûlé par l’amour du beau*. Best for those like you to stick to the *aurea mediocritas*, your golden mean. Now be a good boy and hold out your wrists—it’s time to paint your masterwork.

By now, Liddle had grown genuinely worried. Finley had not answered his door all week, and the smell which was emanating from his flat had grown positively sinister. As he stepped out into the street, he hailed a passing constable. Though he agreed to accompany Liddle, Constable Drury remained skeptical until he reached the first floor landing. Recognizing the charnel odor, he needed no further convincing and hurriedly forced open Finley's apartment door. Aside from the flies, the sitting room looked much the same as it had the last time Liddle had visited, but there was a new canvas on the easel. It was quite striking, but it differed somewhat from the previous two which Liddle had seen. Rather than being highlighted in a vivid red, this canvas was dappled with a muddy black, and . . . it stank. Turning around, he realized that the reds had darkened upon the other canvases, as well. Constable Drury approached the easel and applied his fingers to the painting. He then held out his hand.

"It's blood. There's a whole mason jar full of it on that table."

"But where is Finley?"

"Wait here."

The bedroom door was also locked, and when Drury broke it down, Finley was there to greet him, lying on the bed with his wrists torn open and his canvas scraper still clutched in his hand. Though Drury had never set eyes on him before, when he saw the long, black coat and broad-brimmed hat in which Finley was attired, he recognized him as the murderer he had been pursuing for over a week. Before turning to leave the room, he reached out and closed Finley's staring, green eyes.