

The Second Glass of Absinthe

Reading Guide

“After the first glass you see things as you wish they were. After the second, you see things as they are not. Finally, you see things as they really are, and that is the most horrible thing in the world.”

—Oscar Wilde

In the dizzying world above ten thousand feet, lust for gold, for power, and for flesh intoxicates even the most prudent soul. When the notorious heiress to the Eye Dazzler Mine fortune, Lucinda Ridenour, chooses young Kit Randall to be her lover, he thinks he has the world at his feet, but when their affair takes a freefall into depravity and excess, he must negotiate the troubled waters of his own character in a society without clear signposts or rules.



The Second Glass of Absinthe

by Michelle Black
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After waking up from an absinthe-laced hallucination in which unspeakable acts seem to have taken place, Kit angrily leaves the house of Lucinda and her twenty-year-old son, Christopher, feeling betrayed and exploited.

When Lucinda is found stabbed to death, Leadville, already frenzied by labor unrest and the impending arrival of the railroad, threatens to explode. Kit's uncle, Brad Randall, and his fiancée, Eden Murdoch, arrive in this maelstrom planning to celebrate their wedding, but are shocked to learn their chosen best man is the primary suspect in the heiress's death.

Kit is not the only suspect however. Lucinda and Christopher fired the Eye Dazzler's chief superintendent Jacob Landry, the day before the murder. His union activities were thought to have inspired the dismissal, though gossip abounds that his disastrous love affair with Lucinda before her husband's death played a role.

Kit's former girlfriend, Bella Valentine dabbles in the occult and wants Kit back at any cost, but would she stoop to murdering her rival? Christopher Ridenour thinks he has found the murder weapon and is convinced Kit killed his mother, yet he strangely does not share this information with the police.

Eden resolves to learn the truth and knows the answer must lie within the walls of the Ridenour mansion. She sets upon a course to learn its sordid past and shocking secrets.

Read an Excerpt

A second glass of absinthe is usually a mistake. Kit Randall had learned that much since his arrival in Leadville. He had come to this town in the clouds looking for the kind of fun that gives fun a bad name and absinthe never failed him on that score.

“Green” dreams were frequently strange and sometimes frightening, but could they produce a vision never imagined, much less experienced by its dreamer? Was that why Lucinda limited their adventures over the slotted spoon to once a week?

“We must be prudent, darling,” she would say. But she was prudent about so little else.

His thoughts returned to that bizarre absinthe dream. Why did it refuse to leave him? What had really happened here last night? In his only solid memory he had “watched the clouds come out.” That was his euphemism for gazing at the slow, tantalizing process by which one prepares to drink the liqueur the French called *la fée verte*, the Green Fairy.

The light emerald liquid was dripped through sugar cubes that sat perched atop a slotted spoon. Icy water was then added which rendered a spectacular transformation. The clear green absinthe blossomed into a milky opalescence and was ready to sip.

He recalled settling back deep into the sea of sofa cushions in Lucinda's bohemian-inspired second parlor and staring up at the famous Eye Dazzler rug hanging on the wall. He loved to watch the bright zig-zagging pattern come alive. A thousand triangles danced before his eyes in a carefully terraced lockstep, vibrating red-black-white, red-black-white, hypnotizing him as it always did.

And then...just a nonsense kaleidoscope of images and feelings, some very erotic, yet all strangely ominous.

He tried to muster the energy to get out of bed, but instead collapsed back down into the bedclothes and stared at the painted clouds on the high ceiling of the room. He remembered seeing those clouds in his dream only they had floated over a raging seascape.

Then he caught the whiff of a familiar scent. He grabbed the pillow next to him and sniffed it. Cloves, no doubt of it. No, no, no. Panic gripped him. His breath came in short, ragged spasms. “Lucinda?”

“Yes, darling?” she said from her dressing room.

“What happened here last night?”

She peered at him from around the edge of the door frame. A shadow crossed her face that seemed to age her ten years.

Discussion Questions

1. Both Lucinda Ridenour and her maid, Sadie Branch, express the belief that everyone's virtue is for sale at some price. Do you agree with this cynical assessment? Is Kit Randall really, as Lucinda claims, "the biggest whore of all"?
2. The Victorians were obsessed with the occult and Bella Valentine's idol, Madame Blavatsky, was a real person. Do you think Bella was a charlatan or did she really believe she had psychic abilities? Is the distinction important as long as she helped people?
3. Do you see Jacob Landry as a tragic figure or an amoral opportunist?
4. How does Eden Murdoch's life among the Cheyennes give her unique insight into the motivations of the people in the story?
5. What do you think was the nature of Christopher Ridenour's relationship with his stepfather? Was the older man's influence on him positive or negative? What did Christopher mean when he referred to Orson Ridenour's "true legacy" to him?
6. Lucinda tells Kit that "family boundaries are defined by the secrets they keep." What did she mean by this?
7. Bella makes her living telling the future. Do you share Kit's delight in "the not-knowing"? Is it better to know the future or be surprised?
8. Brad and Kit share a complicated history, raised in the same household, almost as brothers, yet Brad came to assume a father-figure role since Kit's father died in the Civil War. How does their relationship change through the course of the story?
9. Why did a strong-willed woman like Ellen Landry put up with her husband's philandering all those years?
10. How do you interpret Kit Randall's sexuality? Is this a fair question given that words like "homosexual" and "heterosexual" had not yet come into existence?
11. Three couples embark upon new lives at the end of the novel. Without resorting to Bella's Tarot cards, what future do you predict for them?

About the Author



Michelle Black is the author of five Victorian West novels, including the award-winning *Never Come Down*. She has also practiced law, worked at a ski resort, owned a bookstore, published Cheyenne language materials, and raised two sons.

She enjoys snowboarding, horseback riding, and collecting absinthe spoons. She currently divides her time between homes in Kansas City and a log cabin in the Colorado Rockies, elevation 9,200 feet.

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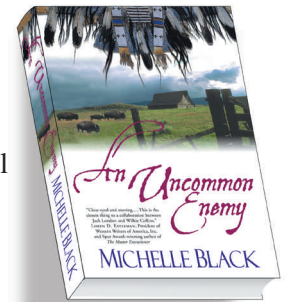
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