

MODERN VICES ♦

Mother's Ruin: The Gin Craze

An AI Wrangler illustrated story



From the film

MARTY

Pull up close to the fire, friends, for tonight we begin a new season, all about the vices, the sweet and terrible things that get their hooks into people and will not let go. And we begin in the crowded, filthy, roaring streets of London, near three hundred years ago, when a whole great city very nearly drank itself to death on cheap gin. They called it the Gin Craze, Carol, and they called the gin itself Mother's Ruin, and the story of it is a warning that has never quite lost its edge.



CAROL

Mother's Ruin. Oh, Marty, what a name to hang on a bottle. A whole city drunk at once, you say. How does a thing like that even get started?



MARTY

By accident of politics and profit, Carol, which is how most of these tales begin. In the early seventeen hundreds the English government, at war with France, wanted to punish French brandy and prop up their own grain farmers, so they threw the doors wide open to distilling. Anyone could make and sell gin, no license, no oversight, from the cheapest grain. And so gin shops sprouted on every corner and cellar and back room, thousands upon thousands of them, and the drink became cheaper than clean water and safer than the foul stuff that ran in the streets. In the poorest districts, Carol, one house in every four or five was selling gin.



CAROL

One house in five. Marty, there would be no escaping it, it would be everywhere you turned. And I suppose if it is cheaper than water, and life is hard, you can see why a person would reach for it.



MARTY

That is the black heart of it, Carol, and no scolding ever changed it. Life in those slums was brutal and short and hopeless, and gin was oblivion for a penny. There was a famous sign said to hang over one cellar door, and it is the whole craze in a single breath. Drunk for a penny, it said. Dead drunk for twopence. Clean straw to lie on, for nothing. That was the offer, Carol. A penny to forget, twopence to forget entirely, and a bit of straw in the back to sleep it off. And for a great many people it was the best offer the world was making them.



CAROL

A penny to forget your whole life. Marty, that is not really a story about drink at all, is it. It is a story about despair, and drink was just the door. How bad did it truly get?



MARTY

It got apocalyptic, Carol. For a stretch of years the deaths in London outran the births. The city was actually shrinking, drinking itself into the grave faster than its children could be born. Gin was blamed for crime, for madness, for the ruin of families and the neglect of children, and the artist William Hogarth caught it forever in a famous print he called Gin Lane, a nightmare street of collapse and death and squalor. And at the very center of Gin Lane he set the most haunting figure of all, a drunken mother, so far gone she does not notice her own baby slipping from her arms over a railing to its death.



CAROL

A mother too far gone to hold her own child. Oh, Marty, that is unbearable, and I understand now exactly why they named it Mother's Ruin. Was that just Hogarth's imagination, or did such things truly happen?



MARTY

They truly happened, Carol, and there is one real case so dark that it shocked even that hardened city, and I will tell it gently. There was a poor woman named Judith Defour, whose small child had been given a little set of new clothes by the workhouse. And Judith, in the grip of the craving, did a monstrous thing. She took the child, and she stripped off those new clothes to sell them, and in doing so she killed her own daughter, all for the price of a bit of gin. She was hanged for it. And that single horror, more than all the sermons and statistics, is what finally began to turn the public against the craze.



CAROL

One unthinkable act putting a face on all the numbers. Marty, it takes something like that, doesn't it, to wake people up. So the government finally acted?

MARTY

It tried, Carol, and here is the lesson the whole affair teaches. The first attempts to stop it were harsh and clumsy. They passed a stiff Gin Act that taxed the drink heavily and demanded costly licenses, meaning to crush the trade outright. And it backfired completely. The gin sellers simply went underground, informers who reported them were beaten and murdered in the streets, and riots broke out. Prohibition by hammer only drove the whole business into the dark and made it more violent. The craze rolled on.

CAROL

So slamming the door shut just made it worse and bloodier. Marty, that is a lesson people seem to have to learn over and over. What finally worked, if the hammer did not?

MARTY

Patience and sense, Carol, and time. A later, wiser Gin Act set the taxes and the license fees at a level that was real but not impossible, high enough to thin out

the corner cellars but low enough that reputable sellers would obey it rather than hide from it. It brought the trade into the light where it could be watched. And alongside the law, the world itself was slowly changing. Grain prices rose, which made gin dearer. Wages and living conditions began, ever so slightly, to improve. And a new and cheerier drink, cheap tea, and the fashion for beer, drew people away. The craze did not end with a bang, Carol. It faded as the despair beneath it eased just enough.

CAROL

So it lifted when life got a little more bearable, not when the punishments got harsher. Marty, that is almost the opposite of what you would expect. What is the meaning you take from Mother's Ruin?

MARTY

This, Carol, and it is why we open the whole season with it. A vice is never really about the bottle, or the pipe, or the card table. It is about the hole in a person's life that the vice rushes in to fill. London did not drink itself half to death because gin was so wonderful. It drank because life in those slums was so unbearable that oblivion for a penny was the kindest thing on offer. You cannot beat a vice like that with the hangman alone. You beat it by making the sober life worth living. That was true on Gin Lane three hundred years ago, and I dare say, Carol, it is just as true tonight. I'm Marty Shepard.

CAROL

And I'm Carol, and tonight I am thinking of that ruined street, and the mother who could not hold her child, and how the cure in the end was a little more hope and not a little more cruelty. Be gentle with the ones reaching for the bottle, friends, for there is always a hole underneath it. Come back to the fire.