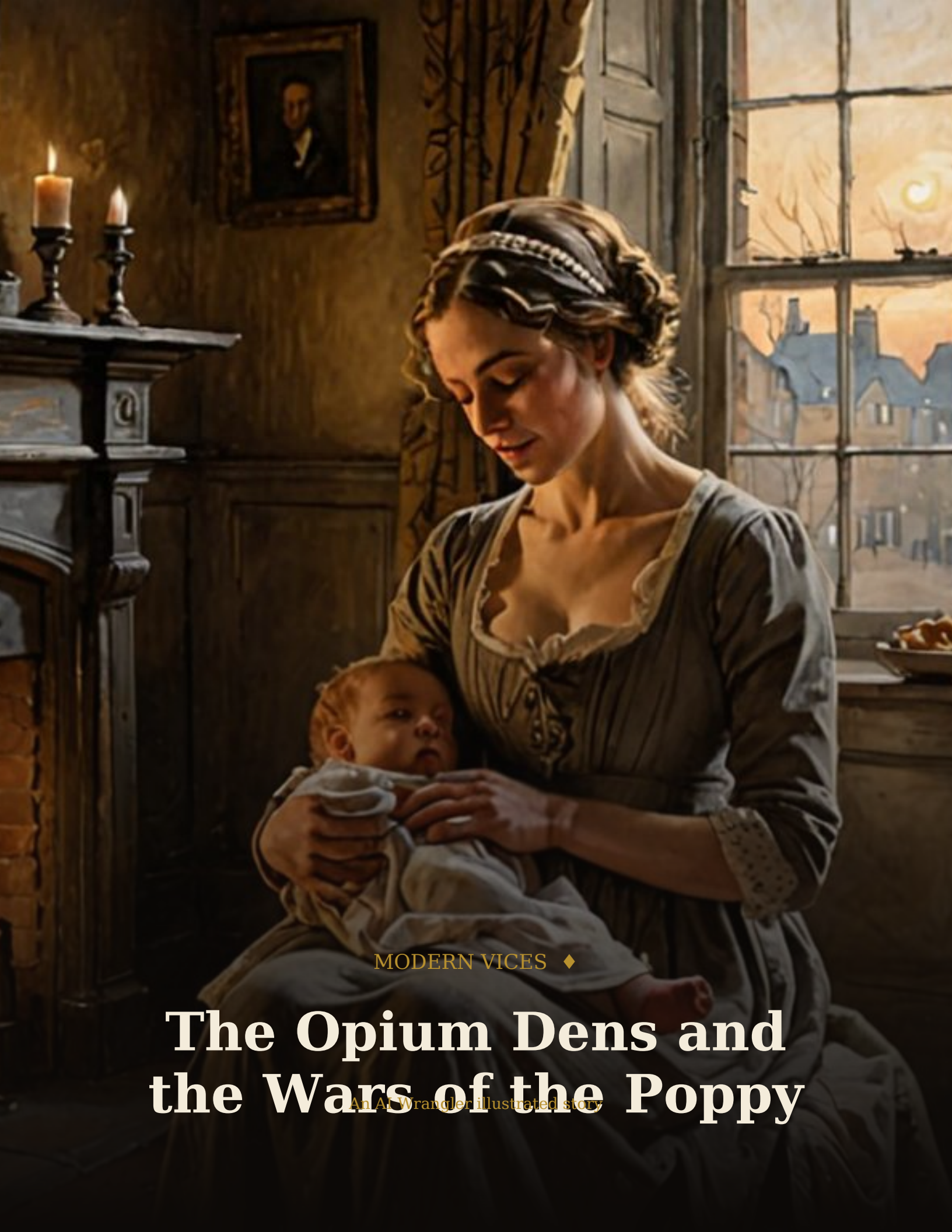




MODERN VICES ♦

The Opium Dens and the Wars of the Poppy

An AI Wrangler illustrated story



From the film

MARTY

Come close to the fire, friends, for tonight our vice is an older and darker one than gin or absinthe, drawn from a beautiful flower, the poppy, and it reaches from the medicine spoon in a Victorian nursery all the way to two wars fought by the greatest empire on earth to force a drug upon an unwilling nation. This is the story of opium, Carol, the dream that became a nightmare, and it is the tale of how respectable people made a fortune poisoning a whole country.



CAROL

From a nursery spoon to a war. Marty, that is a terrible span. I always think of opium as something hidden and shameful, but you make it sound as though it was everywhere.



MARTY

It was everywhere, Carol, and that is the first thing folk forget. In the eighteenth century opium was not some criminal secret. It was medicine, sold openly on every chemist's shelf, mostly in the form of a tincture called laudanum, opium dissolved in alcohol. There was no law against it and no shame in it. People took it for pain, for coughs, for sleeplessness, for sorrow, for everything. And most terribly of all, Carol, it was given to babies. There were soothing syrups for fretful infants, sold by the bottle with cheerful labels, and they were laced with opium, and quiet they certainly kept the children, for some of them were quieted forever.



CAROL

They gave it to babies to keep them quiet. Oh, Marty, that is one of the saddest things you have ever told me, mothers dosing their children out of exhaustion and no idea what they held in their hands. And the grown people who took it, did they know they were being ensnared?



MARTY

Slowly they learned, Carol, and one of them wrote it down so vividly the world has never forgotten. A brilliant, troubled Englishman named Thomas De Quincey published a book called *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*, in which he described both the heavens and the hells of the drug, the glorious dreams it first gave him and then the crushing bondage it became, the way the thing that had promised him paradise slowly closed its fist around his whole life. It was one of the first honest accounts of addiction ever written, Carol, the seduction and then the chain, and readers were both fascinated and frightened.



CAROL

The heaven first and the chain after. Marty, that seems to be the shape of every vice we tell, the beautiful promise up front and the bill that comes due. Where do the famous opium dens come in?



MARTY

They come in with the smoking of it, Carol, a different and more intense way of taking the drug that spread with Chinese immigration into the port cities of the world. An opium den was a dim, smoky room where a person could lie on a bunk and a attendant would prepare the pipe, and the smoker would drift off into that heavy dream for hours. The Victorian imagination made these dens into places of exotic horror and fascination, dens of iniquity in the shadowy corners of London and San Francisco, and they turn up in the lurid novels of the day as the very picture of sin. But the truth, Carol, is that most of the people ruined by opium were never in a den at all. They were ordinary folk with a laudanum bottle on the nightstand.



CAROL

So the frightening den was mostly a story people told, while the real ruin sat quietly in respectable bedrooms. Marty, that is the absinthe lesson again, blaming the exotic and excusing the familiar. But you promised me wars. How does a drug lead to a war?



MARTY

Through greed on a scale that still takes the breath away, Carol, and this is the darkest turn of the tale. The British Empire had a problem. It craved Chinese tea, and silk, and porcelain, and it was pouring its silver into China to buy them, and China wanted almost nothing the British had to sell in return. So British traders found the one thing the Chinese people would buy, opium, grown in British-controlled India and shipped to the Chinese coast by the ton. It reversed the flow of silver and made merchants and the empire itself immensely rich. There was just one difficulty. It was addicting and destroying multitudes of Chinese people, and the Chinese government, quite rightly, wanted it stopped.



CAROL

So an empire deliberately hooked a whole nation to fix its own trade balance. Marty, that is not a vice anymore, that is a crime committed by a government. What did China do?

MARTY

A brave and honorable official named Lin Zexu was sent to end it, Carol, and he did a magnificent thing. He seized the foreign merchants' enormous stockpiles of opium, more than a thousand tons of it, and had it all destroyed, dissolved and flushed into the sea, and he wrote a moral appeal to the British queen herself asking how a Christian nation could do such harm for money. And the British answer, Carol, to my lasting shame in the telling, was to send warships. Twice. The two Opium Wars, in the middle of the eighteen hundreds, in which the modern guns of the empire battered China into submission, forced her to keep her ports open to the drug, and seized territory, including the island that became Hong Kong.

CAROL

They went to war to keep selling the poison. Marty, I knew empires were cruel, but to fight a war for the right to keep a nation addicted, that is a special kind of darkness. Did anyone ever reckon with it?

MARTY

History has reckoned with it, Carol, though slowly. In China those wars are remembered to this day as the beginning of a long century of humiliation at foreign hands, a wound that shaped that whole nation's story. And in the West the Opium Wars have become a byword for the very worst of what empire and commerce will do when there is enough money in the ruin of others. As for opium itself, it took decades more for the respectable world to admit the harm on its own doorstep, to pull the drug from the baby syruks and the corner shelves and finally to treat it as the dangerous thing it always was.

CAROL

So the private ruin in the nurseries and the public crime of the wars both took far too long to face. Marty, what is the meaning you take from the poppy?

MARTY

This, Carol, and it is the hardest of our lessons so far. Every vice has its victims, but opium reminds us to look past the poor soul on the bunk in the den and ask a colder question. Who is getting rich? Because behind the shameful, hidden, individual addiction there was, in this case, a vast and respectable machine, merchants and shareholders and an empire, all growing wealthy on that suffering and willing to go to war to protect the trade. The person in the den was the victim of the vice. But the vice itself was somebody's fortune. Follow the poppy far enough, Carol, and you do not find a sinner. You find a business. I'm Marty Shepard.

CAROL

And I'm Carol, and tonight I am thinking of the babies dosed to silence and the honorable man who flushed the poison into the sea only to be answered with cannon. When a vice ruins the poor, friends, look and see who upstairs is counting the money. Come back to the fire.