

# The Lady And The Sin

CAROLYN FINN

The fire burned brightly in the gloomy room, and a November rain beat drearily against the high windows. The guests were held in a strange hypnosis by the atmosphere of the hour, and none challenged the old man's statement. They waited, expectantly, knowing that some story must follow, and after a moment it did.

"I am thinking of a woman of whom my mother told me," he continued, relighting his pipe and looking into the bright flames before him. "Indeed, it was the day that reminded me of the story, for this woman's troubles—if such they can be called—began on a day which must have been much like this one.

"She was a beautiful girl (so my father related) and one known throughout the district as kind and virtuous. In a day when piety was valued above all other virtues, she was religious even above the strict standards of the time. She was modest and sweet and charitable, and all who knew her loved her and respected her. Her family was an old one in the community, and what is now known as a 'good' one.

"In view of all these things, it is not hard to understand that she was quite popular with the young men who knew her, and she was courted constantly by numerous hopefuls, who sent her flowers and bonbons and successions of tender letters. All of this attention did not turn the head of the young lady, however, for she was, as I have said, a model of modesty. Her one vice was that she read constantly the light and frivolous novels in which love was treated as an exciting and

mysterious passion. It is possible that she dwelt too deeply on these things, at any rate she gradually came to the conclusion that a beautiful and thrilling romance would never come to her from any of the men she knew. Unwillingly she resigned herself to her fate; but in spite of the proddings of her anxious parents, who wanted her to marry young while her opportunities were best, she could not come to like one young man better than the next. She treated them all with a warm friendliness but was consistently indifferent to their charms as lovers.

"So at last it came to be November—a day, I have said, not unlike this one. The young lady's good parents went visiting that Sunday, but she pleaded a headache and at last gained permission to stay home alone. Actually she had no real headache, but only the dull stuffy feeling which, I believe, we all know when our lives seem to be taking an unexciting turn. She was vaguely dissatisfied with her existence though she knew not why, and the greyness of the day depressed her greatly. So in an effort to amuse herself, she turned to a brief novel concerning a lady whose love affairs were more illicit than uninteresting. Being truly pure of spirit and mind, however, she dutifully put away the book after perhaps half an hour's reading, feeling guilty to have touched such forbidden fruit. But, as it often happens, although her intentions were clean and she felt true sorrow at having read the unfortunate story, the incidents related kept popping unbidden into her mind. Distraught at being visited with these impure thoughts, she went to



the piano and there tried to lose herself in music. Here again she was betrayed, for the melodies that sprang to her fingers were frivolous and sentimental and altogether in keeping with wild longings for true passion. Poor girl! Who are we to judge, who perhaps are not even her equals in purity of spirit, how valiantly she fought these strange thoughts and desires!

"The afternoon wore on and her mood became increasingly strange. Exotic music, the like of which she had never heard before, somehow came from the ivory keys she touched. The room in which she played seemed filled with mysterious perfumes, and yet only that morning she had noticed how musty and damp it smelled. She drifted off on an imaginary cloud to far-off lands, where her shining knight awaited, and there (in her fantasy) she attained perfect happiness on earth such as no mortal had ever before even dreamt. The rain, beating against the panes, lulled her into a waking sleep, and it seemed to her that she did not really exist among the commonplace, that her fantasy was reality and reality the dream.

"As twilight came on, she came back to herself to some extent, and leaving the piano she went about the house seeing to the fires and lighting the lamps. Her parents returned shortly, and in a little while they ate supper. If she was unusually quiet, they perhaps attributed it to her pretended headache, or perhaps they did not notice it at all, for parents who know their daughters best are sometimes the most blind to unnatural moods.

"At any rate, it was known by the parents as well as the girl that a certain young gentleman was coming to call that evening. Of all the many swains, he was perhaps the most constant in his atten-

tions. He was a handsome lad and quite wealthy, but there were whispers in the district that he had indeed sown his share of wild oats while away at the university. Our young miss had heard these whispers, and for that reason was always unusually modest and withdrawing in her contacts with him because she felt that purity in a man was the greatest virtue and that there was something slightly shameful in permitting attentions from one on whom the whole county passed judgment. Her mother shared this opinion, but she was charmed by this particular lad's grace and manners — and no doubt by his fortune, for she was only human — and steadfastly asserted that she believed none of what she termed 'malicious and jealous slander.' The father of the young lady made no comment aloud, but to himself was grateful that at least one of what he termed 'this simpering generation' had had a taste of what he considered real life. It was the natural admiration of an older man for traits which he recognized — but did not admit — having had in his own youth.

"At any rate, the young gentleman arrived in time to take coffee with the family, and they chatted politely of politics and weather, until at last he suggested that with her good parents' approval perhaps they could take a stroll, for in spite of the November damp it was quite warm out and the rain had ceased. And so it came about.

"I cannot say exactly what happened on this stroll, for the lady always conducted herself in the most refined manner. But a moon had risen now and lighted the banks of clouds in the sky in a most unusual and stirring manner, and the soft damp air suggested spring rather than early winter. It might be also that the mood of the afternoon had so conquered



her soul that all the virtues she had guarded so carefully thus far in life abandoned her in her hour of need. But before the couple returned to the house, she had tasted the bittersweet fruit of passion.

"Of course they were married, and almost immediately, which fact caused no little comment among the good people of the community; and some of the less charitable parishioners were heard to attach unkind epithets to our lady of virtue. Of these things I know little, but at any rate the newlyweds settled down in a handsome home and in the early summer became proud parents of a handsome young son.

"Now the young lady, as I have shown before, was not in love with this her husband much before her marriage to him. In fact it is quite possible that even as she made her vows at the altar, the look of sadness which many noted on her sweet face was not due to leaving her parents whom she loved, but going with him whom she did not. I cannot say with certainty, of course, but what passed in the next decades would lead one to believe that such thoughts are not based on truth.

"For as the years passed, and other children came, the couple showed increasingly their love for one another. It became the talk of the community how his eyes glowed with love at mention of her

name, and how her face lighted with tender pride when he was in her sight. The children grew up strong and happy, as children do only in an atmosphere of true love, and the happiness of the entire family became a byword in the surrounding countryside."

The fire had burned low, and as the old man finished his tale the guests stirred uneasily. The entire company sat silently in the dark and gloomy room, their minds busy with many reflections of many natures.

At last one of the younger guests, a serious-faced youth, leaned forward with some hesitation.

"Tell us," he said, "if she was a truly good mother and if she repented her sin, or if she merely put up a greater sham than that she had put up before. If you know these things, tell us."

"My son," said the old man slowly, a ghost of a smile upon his lips, "what I have told you I know to be true. She was the best mother a boy could have, and her love for her husband, once acquired, was the strongest I have ever observed."

"But how can you know?" cried the youth.

The fire crackled and a log crumpled among showers of orange sparks. The old man bowed his head and closed his eyes.

#### SAMPLING . . . .

I guess most of us have someone or something which hangs in our mind like that old coat in the hall closet—not always visible but always there to bring back memories when the door is opened.

*Goofy*

ROBERT CHAFFIN