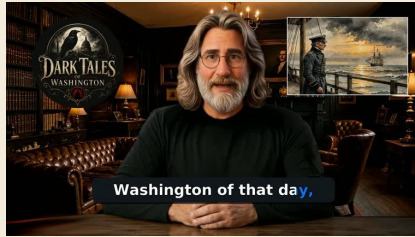




DARK TALES OF WASHINGTON ♦

The Petticoat Affair

An AI Wrangler illustrated story



From the film

MARTY

Come in close to the fire tonight, friends, because this tale comes to us out of the young capital of Washington in the year 1829, a raw and muddy city of boarding houses and candlelight, and it is a story about how the sharpest weapon in all of politics turned out to be not a musket nor a law, but a whisper. This is true history, Carol, every word of it documented, and at its center is a woman named Peggy, and a great old general in the President's house who loved her honor more than he loved his own cabinet. Before it was finished, this quarrel over a single lady would paralyze the government of the United States for two whole years and shatter friendships that were meant to last a lifetime.

CAROL

A whisper bringing down a government, Marty. And I've never even heard her name. Who was Peggy?



MARTY

She was Margaret O'Neale, Carol, though everyone called her Peggy, and she was born to a tavern keeper who kept a boarding house here in Washington. Picture it, a warm firelit room full of politicians and army officers taking their supper, and among them moved this innkeeper's daughter, dark-eyed and quick-witted and beautiful, playing the pianoforte, trading jokes with senators, sharp of tongue and utterly unafraid. She had grown up in the company of powerful men, Carol, and she was not the least bit shy of them. And that, in the Washington of that day, was already half a scandal all by itself.

CAROL

A tavern keeper's daughter who could hold her own with senators. Marty, I already like her. But I can guess the proper ladies of the town did not.



MARTY

They did not, Carol, and here the shadows gather. Peggy married young, a navy purser named John Timberlake, a man often away for years at a time on long sea voyages. And while he was gone, she boarded in her father's house alongside a rising senator from Tennessee, a widower named John Eaton. The two were often seen together, and the tongues began to wag. Then came the blow. Out at sea, far from home, John Timberlake died. The official cause was illness, but the whisperers of Washington would not have it so. They said, Carol, with no proof at all, that he had cut his own throat in despair over his wife's unfaithfulness with Eaton. It was a cruel and a false thing, but it was exactly the kind of story that spreads on the wind.

CAROL

Oh, that is vicious, Marty, to take a man's death at sea and twist it into a dagger against his widow. And with nothing to back it up. So what did Peggy and this Senator Eaton do?



MARTY

Why, they married, Carol, on the first day of the year 1829, only months after Timberlake was in his grave. And to the gossips that swift wedding was as good as a confession. But here is the turn that lifts this from a tavern squabble into a matter of state. That very same season, a new president was coming to Washington, an old soldier, a hero of the Battle of New Orleans, the fierce and grieving Andrew Jackson. And Jackson chose his dear friend John Eaton to be his Secretary of War. So of a sudden, Carol, the woman at the heart of all this whispering was not just an innkeeper's daughter. She was the wife of a cabinet minister, and she expected to take her place among the great ladies of the capital.

CAROL

And I'll wager those great ladies had other ideas. Marty, why did Jackson of all people take such a risk, bringing this scandal right into his cabinet?



MARTY

Ah, Carol, now you touch the wound, and it is the beating heart of the whole story. Andrew Jackson had buried his own beloved wife, Rachel, only weeks before he took office. And Rachel had been savaged, Carol, torn to pieces by nearly the very same kind of gossip, whispers about the timing of her own marriage years before, dragged through the mud in the newspapers during the campaign. Jackson believed with his whole soul that this cruelty had broken her heart and put her in her grave. He carried her portrait next to his chest. So when he saw the ladies of Washington turning that same knife on Peggy Eaton, it was not politics to him. It was Rachel all over again. And this old warrior swore he would defend Peggy's honor to his last breath.

CAROL

Oh, Marty. So it was never really about Peggy at all for him, was it. It was grief. He was defending his lost Rachel through this other woman.



MARTY

Just so, Carol. But grief on one side met pride on the other. For the ladies of Washington closed ranks against Peggy like a fortress. And their general was Floride Calhoun, the wife of the Vice President himself, John C. Calhoun. Floride was a proud Carolina aristocrat, and she decided that a woman of Peggy's reputation would not be received in her parlor, not ever. And where the Vice President's wife led, the other cabinet wives followed. Picture the scene, Carol, a grand candlelit reception, gowns of silk and lace, and when Peggy Eaton entered on her husband's arm, the great ladies would gather their skirts and turn their backs, or leave the room entirely rather than sit at table with her. At dinner after dinner she was frozen out, cut dead, made invisible in the very society her husband helped to govern.

CAROL

Turning their backs in their fine gowns, Marty. There is something so cold about that, a cruelty you can do in a ballroom with a smile on your face. And the President could not simply order them to be kind, could he?



MARTY

He could not, Carol, and it drove him half to madness. He raged, he investigated, he gathered testimony to prove Peggy's innocence, and he declared to his own cabinet that she was, in his words, as chaste as a virgin. He even suspected his rival Calhoun's hand behind the whole boycott, to wound him through his friend. The government ground to a halt over it. Cabinet business went undone while the President spent his fury on a war of dinner invitations. And in the middle of this frozen court, Carol, one clever man saw his opening. The Secretary of State, Martin Van Buren, was a widower, a smooth and smiling little man from New York with no wife to enforce any boycott. And so Van Buren was free to be kind to the Eatons, to call on Peggy, to escort her, to show her every courtesy.

CAROL

And I'll bet Jackson noticed every bit of that kindness. Marty, you're telling me being nice to a snubbed woman was the shrewdest political move of the age?



MARTY

The shrewdest of all, Carol, though I do believe Van Buren was also simply a decent man in it. But Jackson noticed, oh, he noticed. Every courtesy Van Buren paid to Peggy raised him higher in the old man's heart, while every cold shoulder from the Calhoun faction sank them lower. And the alliance between Jackson and Calhoun, which was to have carried them for years, cracked and fell apart, poisoned by this social war over one woman. At last, Carol, in the spring of 1831, Jackson could see no other way to break the deadlock. On the advice of the cunning Van Buren, he did a thing no president had ever done before or has ever done since. He demanded the resignation of nearly his entire cabinet, sweeping them all out at a single stroke to be rid of the poison. The only mass purge of a cabinet in all our history, Carol, and it was set off by a dinner-party quarrel.

CAROL

The whole cabinet swept away over a boycott of one woman. Marty, that is astonishing. And what became of the players when the smoke cleared?



MARTY

The wheel turned, Carol, as it always does. Van Buren, the man who had been kind, rose and rose in Jackson's favor until the old general made him his chosen heir, and Martin Van Buren became the next President of the United States. Calhoun, once first in line, was cast into the outer dark, his great alliance with Jackson broken forever. And Peggy and John Eaton were sent off to happier posts far from the cruel parlors of Washington. All of it, Carol, the making of one president and the ruin of another, turning on whether the proper ladies of the capital would receive an innkeeper's daughter for supper. That is the story, and it is all true. I'm Marty Shepard.

CAROL

And I'm Carol, and tonight I'll be thinking about proud Floride Calhoun gathering her skirts, and a grieving old general seeing his lost Rachel in another woman's face, and how the smallest cruelties, done in silk and candlelight, can topple the mightiest men in the land. Be kinder than the gossips, friends, and always, always come back to the fire.

