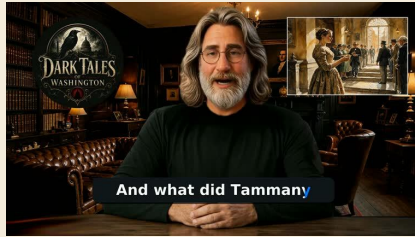




DARK TALES OF WASHINGTON ♦

Boss Tweed and Tammany Hall

An AI Wrangler illustrated story



From the film

MARTY

Come in close to the fire tonight, friends, because this one comes to us out of the great roaring city of New York, in the years just after the Civil War, when the streets were gaslit and cobbled and thick with people from every corner of the earth. This is the true tale of William Magear Tweed, the man they simply called the Boss, and how he stole an entire city blind. He was the ruler of a machine called Tammany Hall, Carol, and for a few short years he owned New York the way a man owns a pocket watch. And it took a fellow with a pen and a drawing pad to finally bring him down.

CAROL

Oh, Marty, I have heard that name, Boss Tweed, but I never knew the whole of it. A man who owned a whole city. Tell me first, what was this Tammany Hall? Was it a place, or a thing, or a person?



MARTY

It was all three in a way, Carol. Tammany Hall was the great Democratic political machine of New York, and picture the city then. After the war, the ships came in day after day, packed to the rails with immigrants, Irish and German mostly, poor and frightened and knowing not a soul. They stepped off onto those crowded wards with nothing. And there stood Tammany, ready with a helping hand. A basket of coal in the winter. A turkey at Christmas. A job digging the streets. Even your citizenship papers, rushed through a friendly judge so you could vote. And what did Tammany ask in return, Carol? Only that vote. Only that, given faithfully, election after election. It was charity and it was bondage, all tangled up together.

CAROL

Oh, that is a clever kind of trap, isn't it, Marty. Kindness with a hook in it. And this William Tweed, how does a man come to sit on top of a thing like that? Where did he begin?



MARTY

He began humble, Carol, a chairmaker's son, a big good-natured boy from the Lower East Side who ran with a volunteer fire company. And that is a thing to remember, because the firehouses in those days were little brotherhoods, and a genial giant who could rally the men had the makings of a politician. And Tweed was a giant, Carol, near three hundred pounds, with a great booming laugh and a diamond stickpin blazing on his shirt front, and a memory for names and faces that never failed him. Men loved him. He climbed, rung by rung, alderman and congressman and boss of the Tammany machine, until by the late eighteen-sixties he sat at the very center of the web. He controlled the mayor. He leaned on the governor. He had picked the judges who sat in his courts, and he held the keys to the city treasury. There was no honest wall left standing between William Tweed and the money of New York.

CAROL

The keys to the treasury. Marty, that is the sentence that makes my stomach turn. When one man holds all of that and no one can say no to him, what on earth does he do with it? How did the stealing actually work?



MARTY

It was beautifully simple, Carol, and that is the wicked genius of it. The Tweed Ring stole through the bills. The city needed things built, needed chairs and carpets and plaster and stone, and every contractor who did that work was told, quietly, to pad his bill. Charge the city ten times, a hundred times what the thing was worth, and hand the difference back to the Ring. And the crown jewel of it, Carol, the monument to their greed, was the new County Courthouse just behind City Hall, a grand marble building that was supposed to cost a few hundred thousand dollars. By the time the Ring was finished with it, the city had been billed something like thirteen million.

CAROL

Thirteen million. Marty, for one building? In those days that must have been a fortune beyond imagining. What could possibly cost that much? Surely somebody added it up and saw.



MARTY

You would think so, Carol, but they controlled who did the adding. Let me give you the particulars, because they are almost too absurd to believe. There was a plasterer paid millions of dollars for his work, so much that they nicknamed him the Prince of Plasterers. There were thermometers billed at thousands. There was a carpenter paid for a year of labor a sum that no honest carpenter could earn in a lifetime, in a building that was half of it still bare. Furniture and carpets billed in figures that would have furnished a palace ten times over. And all across the city, in all the contracts, the same trick, over and over. When the reckoning finally came, Carol, the honest men who tried to total up the theft of the Tweed Ring landed on tens of millions of dollars, and some who studied it said it ran far higher than that. They robbed the city the way the tide robs a beach, a little from every wave, until the whole shore was gone.

CAROL

It takes my breath away, Marty. And the ordinary people, the very immigrants Tammany fed with those Christmas turkeys, they were the ones being robbed all the while. But how do you catch a man who owns the mayor and the judges and the newspapers? Who was left to even try?



MARTY

That is where our hero comes in, Carol, and he is not a policeman or a prosecutor. He was a cartoonist, an artist named Thomas Nast, who drew for a magazine called Harper's Weekly. And week after week, Nast drew Tweed, drew him savage and true, a bloated vulture in a diamond stickpin feeding on the carcass of the city, the Boss and his Ring standing in a circle each pointing at the next man saying, it was him, not me. And here is the thing, Carol, the thing that terrified Tweed more than any editorial ever could. Half the men whose votes he owned could not read a word. But they could look. Tweed said it himself, and it is one of the famous lines in all our history. He said, I don't care what the papers write about me, my constituents can't read. But they can see those damned pictures.

CAROL

Oh, Marty. He wasn't afraid of the words, he was afraid of the drawings. There is something almost beautiful in that, that a man's own picture could damn him. And did it? Did Nast's pictures finally do it?



MARTY

They lit the fuse, Carol, and then the New York Times lit the powder. For someone inside the Ring, someone who had quarreled with them, slipped the secret account books to the Times, the real ledgers, and the paper printed them for all the world to see, the padded bills laid out in cold black figures. Now the honest men had their proof, and the city rose up. Reformers came at Tweed from every side. He was arrested, Carol, the great Boss himself, hauled into the very courts he used to own. And he tried everything. Money couldn't save him now, and his friends melted away. He was convicted and sent to prison. But the story is not done, because Tweed was not a man to sit still.

CAROL

Not done? Marty, don't tell me he got away. After all of that, after the pictures and the ledgers and the trial, don't tell me the Boss slipped the net.



MARTY

For a while, Carol, he did just that. Allowed out for a visit under guard, Tweed simply walked away, and he ran. He ran in disguise, a fugitive, out of the country and across the ocean, all the way to Spain, thinking he had vanished from the earth. And now comes the piece of this tale that no storyteller could improve upon, the justice so perfect you would call it invented if it were not true. The Spanish officials who took hold of him did not have a photograph. What they had, Carol, was one of Thomas Nast's cartoons, a drawing of Tweed the artist had made to mock him. They looked at the drawing, and they looked at the great heavy man in front of them, and they knew. He was identified and captured off the strength of a cartoon, in a country where he did not even speak the language. The very pictures he had cursed reached across an ocean and closed their hand on him.

CAROL

Off a cartoon. Marty, my heart. The one thing he feared, the drawings his people could see, and it followed him clear to Spain and caught him. So they brought him back. What became of the Boss in the end?



MARTY

They brought him home, Carol, back to New York, back behind bars, and this time there was no walking away. He was a broken man by then, his machine shattered, his friends scattered or turned against him, his fortune clawed back by the city he had robbed. And in eighteen seventy-eight, in the Ludlow Street Jail, in a cell in the very city he had once held in his fist, William Magear Tweed died. And that is the whole shape of it, Carol, the reason we still tell it around the fire. One man, genial and enormous and utterly without shame, took an entire city for himself, fed the poor with one hand and picked their pockets with the other, and bought every judge and every lawmaker he needed. And in the end it was not an army that brought him down, nor even the great newspapers alone. It was a man with a drawing pad, who understood that a picture can say what a whole city is thinking, and who chased a thief clear across the sea with nothing but a pen. So the next time someone tells you that art is a small and harmless thing, Carol, you remember the Boss, who could not read his way out of a cartoon. I'm Marty Shepard.

CAROL

And I'm Carol, and tonight I'll be thinking about that little magazine drawing that toppled a giant, and about all the ordinary people who saw the truth in a picture

when the powerful hoped they never would. Watch who feeds you and asks only for your vote, keep your eyes open even when you can't read the fine print, and always, always come back to the fire.

