



DARK TALES OF QUEBEC ♦

La Corriveau

An AI Wrangler illustrated story



From the film

MARTY

Come in close to the fire tonight, friends, because we are crossing the river into old Quebec, into New France just after the Conquest, and I want to tell you the true and terrible story of a woman whose name still makes the old people of Lévis lower their voices. Marie-Josephte Corriveau. La Corriveau. She was a real woman, born in the parish of Saint-Vallier in 1733, a farmer's daughter, and she died on the gallows in 1763. But death was only the beginning of her, Carol, because for two hundred and sixty years her iron cage has gone on swinging and clanking in the Quebec night.

CAROL

An iron cage, Marty. Already my skin is prickling and you have hardly begun. A farmer's daughter from Saint-Vallier — how does a girl like that end up on a gallows? Tell me about her, the real her, before she was a ghost.



MARTY

She was married young, Carol, as girls were then, to a farmer named Charles Bouchard, and by all accounts they had a life together and children, eleven years of marriage, until Charles died in 1760. And here the whispers began, because within little more than a year the young widow married again, to a neighbour named Louis-Étienne Dodier. And that second marriage, Carol, was not a happy one. The neighbours heard the quarrels. They saw the bruises. It was a household full of anger. And then one morning in the winter of 1763, Louis Dodier was found dead in his barn.

CAROL

Oh, Marty. Found dead in his barn. And a marriage everyone had heard fighting through the walls. I can imagine how the parish must have talked. What did they say had happened to him?



MARTY

At first, Carol, they said his head had been battered by the hooves of his own horses, an accident in the stable, and he was buried. But the talk would not die down, and this was a strange, uneasy time — the British had just taken Quebec, the French colonists were now living under British military rule, under redcoat soldiers and English law they did not know. So it was a British military court, not a French one, that ordered Dodier dug up again. And when they looked at his wounds, Carol, they did not see the marks of a horse. They saw the marks of blows. Murder. And suspicion fell on the house, on Marie-Joseph and on her old father, Joseph.

CAROL

Her father too. Marty, this is worse than I thought — the whole family under a shadow. A foreign court, soldiers, a language that isn't theirs. How could she even hope for a fair hearing in a room like that?



MARTY

She could barely hope at all, Carol, and here the story takes its cruelest turn. In the first trial, her father Joseph confessed to the killing, to save his daughter, and he was sentenced to hang. But before the execution a priest came forward, and the truth came out — the father was shielding her. So a second court-martial was held, and this time Marie-Josephte herself confessed. She said that she alone had killed Louis Dodier in his sleep, striking him in the head with a hatchet, and that her father had known nothing of it until after. The British court believed her. And under English law, Carol, the murder of a husband by a wife was not called simple murder. It was called petty treason.

CAROL

Petty treason. Marty, what does that mean — why would killing a husband be treason? And why does the word frighten me so much more than murder does?



MARTY

Because it frightened them too, Carol. In that old English law, a wife killing her husband was held to be like a subject killing a king, a rebellion against the natural order itself, and it carried a punishment meant to horrify. She was sentenced to be hanged, and then — and this is the part that seared itself into Quebec forever — her body was to be hung afterward in chains, in an iron gibbet, for all to see. So in April of 1763 Marie-Josephte Corriveau was hanged on the Plains of Abraham. And then her dead body was locked into a cage of iron, une cage de fer, forged to the shape of a human form, and hung up at a crossroads at Pointe-Lévy, across the river from Quebec, for the world to look upon.

CAROL

A cage forged to the shape of a body. Marty, I can see it hanging there against the grey sky and I want to look away. How long — please tell me they did not leave her out there long.



MARTY

Weeks, Carol. Weeks. The iron cage hung at that crossroads at Lauzon, swinging in the wind by the road where every farmer and traveller had to pass, and inside it her body, held together by the bars, exposed to the crows and the weather as a warning to anyone who might do murder. The French habitants were appalled — this was not their way, this ghoulish English display, and the horror of it went deep into the people who had to walk past it in the dusk. At last the parish could bear it no longer, and after some five weeks the cage was taken down and buried near the church. And you would think, Carol, that would be the end of the poor woman. But a thing that terrible does not stay buried in a people's mind.

CAROL

No, I don't suppose it does. Marty, I can feel it already — a body in an iron cage at a crossroads is exactly the kind of thing that grows into something in the dark. What did she become, in the telling?



MARTY

She became a witch, Carol. Over the generations, as the true story blurred, the grandmothers of Quebec turned Marie-Josephte Corriveau into the province's most famous sorceress and phantom. In the tales they told by the fire, she had not one murdered husband but seven, poisoned and butchered one after another. They said she had dealings with the Devil, that she was a witch of black arts. And they said that on wild nights her iron cage came loose from wherever it was buried, and swung glowing at the crossroads, and that she reached her bony arms out through the bars, her eyes burning like coals, to seize any traveller foolish enough to pass her in the dark.

CAROL

Oh, Marty. Her arms through the bars. I would run — but you can never outrun the ones in these stories, can you? Is that the tale they told, that she chases them?



MARTY

It is the most famous one, Carol. They tell of a man from Saint-Vallier walking home late along the shore road, when he hears behind him a dreadful clanking, iron on iron, and turns to see the cage of La Corriveau bounding after him through the night, her dead face pressed to the bars, her eyes two points of fire, begging or shrieking at him to carry her across the river to the witches' sabbath on the Île d'Orléans, for she cannot cross running water herself. And he runs, Carol, runs till his heart nearly bursts, and faints at his own door, and in the morning there are the marks of iron fingers burned into him. That is the Corriveau of the campfire — the clank of the cage, the glowing eyes through the bars, the thing at the crossroads that chases you home.

CAROL

The clank of the cage behind you in the dark. Marty, that is the sound I'll hear tonight when I close my eyes. And the strange thing is my heart aches for her, too — the real woman under all those stories. Did anyone ever find out the truth of what she did?



MARTY

We never will know it all, Carol, and that is part of her power. Was she a cold murderess, or a battered woman who struck back at a violent husband, or a daughter caught in something darker — we have only the confession she gave to a foreign court in a frightened, conquered land. But here is the strange gift of it. That very cage, the iron cage itself, was rediscovered in the eighteen-fifties, dug up from the churchyard, and it caused a sensation — it was even shown, they say, in a museum down in the United States, and after being lost for generations it has in our own time been found again and brought home to Quebec. And the great writers of the province, Philippe Aubert de Gaspé and William Kirby and many since, all set her down in their books, so that a poor farm woman from Saint-Vallier became immortal.

CAROL

Immortal — the very thing that punishment was never meant to give her. Marty, why do you think she, of all people, is the one Quebec could never forget?



MARTY

Because she is the wound of the Conquest itself, Carol, dressed up as a ghost story. Think on it — an ordinary French Catholic woman, tried by British soldiers, condemned under a foreign law, and hung in a cage in a fashion that horrified her own people. When the habitants told and retold her story by the fire, growing her into a witch, they were holding onto a memory of that strange, frightening first winter under the redcoats, when the world they knew had been overturned. La Corriveau carries all of it — the fear, the injustice, the horror of that iron cage swinging at the crossroads. And so she could never be allowed to simply die. She became the dark heart of Quebec's own storytelling.

CAROL

The wound of a whole people, kept alive as a witch by the fire. Oh, Marty, that is the saddest and truest kind of ghost there is.

MARTY

It is the truest kind there is, Carol. So tonight we remember her honestly — Marie-Josephte Corriveau, a real woman of Saint-Vallier, hanged in 1763 and hung in iron at the crossroads of Pointe-Lévy, whatever she did or did not do. We remember the parish that had to walk past that cage in the dusk, and turned their horror into a story to hold it. And when the wind comes up off the St.

Lawrence tonight, and you hear iron clanking somewhere far down the road, you will know whose cage that is, still swinging after two hundred and sixty years. I'm Marty Shepard.

CAROL

And I'm Carol, and tonight my heart is with that woman in the iron cage, and with all the frightened people who loved and feared her into legend. Latch your door soft, be gentle with the ones under your roof, and if you hear the iron on the wind — come back to the fire.