



DARK TALES OF QUEBEC ♦

The Headless Ghost of Griffintown

An All Wrangler illustrated story



From the film

MARTY

Come in near the fire tonight, friends, because we are going down to old Montreal, to a hard little quarter called Griffintown, where the Irish came to work the canal and the docks and the rail yards. It was a place of packed brick houses and factory smoke and hungry winters, hard by the Lachine Canal, and in the summer of 1879 it was the scene of a killing so terrible it has never left that corner of the city. This is the true story of Mary Gallagher, and of the friend who took her head, and of the ghost that comes back every seventh year still looking for it.

CAROL

Oh, Marty, right away my heart is going. Griffintown — I can just picture it, the smoke and the canal and all those Irish families making a life in a new country. Who was Mary Gallagher? Tell me about her before the awful part.



MARTY

She was a working woman, Carol, about thirty-eight years old, Irish, poor, and no stranger to a hard road. Some say she made her living on the streets, and she was fond of the drink, as many were in that quarter where life was cruel and comfort was scarce. And she had a friend, a woman named Susan Kennedy, near the same age, married, and cut from much the same hard cloth. The two of them were companions, Carol, the way lonely women in a poor place can be — drinking companions, keeping each other's company through the long days. And that is what makes what happened between them so hard to bear.

CAROL

A friend. Oh, Marty, I already dread where this is going. Two women who leaned on each other in a hard place. What in the world came between them?



MARTY

A man, Carol. It so often is. On a hot day at the end of June, 1879, Mary Gallagher and Susan Kennedy fell in together with a fellow named Michael Flanagan, a canal worker, and the three of them went up to a room on William Street to drink. And they drank, Carol, all through the afternoon and into the evening — bottle after bottle, the heat and the liquor and the closeness of that little room working on them all. And somewhere in that drunken haze, a jealousy caught fire between the two women over the attentions of Michael Flanagan. A jealousy over a man, between two friends, both of them too far gone in drink to know their own hearts.

CAROL

The heat and the drink and the jealousy all boiling together in one small room. Marty, I can feel the danger of it. What did Susan Kennedy do?



MARTY

Michael Flanagan had fallen down drunk and senseless, Carol, no use to anyone. But Susan Kennedy did not fall asleep. Somewhere in that black rage, she took up a small axe — a hatchet that was in the room — and she fell upon Mary Gallagher, her own friend, as she lay there helpless with the drink. And Carol, I will tell you plain because the truth of this is what makes the legend, she did not merely kill her. She struck her again and again, and she cut the head clean from Mary Gallagher's body, and she left it there in the room, apart from her.

CAROL

Oh — oh, Marty. Her friend. With a hatchet. I have my hand to my mouth. How was such a thing ever discovered? Who found her?



MARTY

The neighbours, Carol. In a place like Griffintown the walls were thin and the houses close, and word of a horror travels fast. When people came to that room on William Street, they found a sight the old city never forgot — Mary Gallagher's body, and her head set apart, and Susan Kennedy, it was said, calmly washing the blood away, so drunk and so far gone that she scarcely seemed to know the ruin around her. And Michael Flanagan asleep through all of it, waking to a nightmare. The police took them both.

CAROL

Washing the blood away as if it were any ordinary spill. Marty, that chills me more than the axe did. What happened to her — to Susan Kennedy — when the law got hold of her?



MARTY

She was tried that autumn, Carol, and it was the sensation of all Montreal — the newspapers full of it, the courtroom packed, the whole city sick and fascinated by the Griffintown horror. Michael Flanagan was charged too, but he had been dead drunk and senseless, and the case against him fell away. It was Susan Kennedy who stood in the dock, and Susan Kennedy whom the jury found guilty of murder. The judge sentenced her to hang, Carol. To hang by the neck for what she had done to her friend.

CAROL

To hang. Oh, Marty. And did they? Did they carry it out?



MARTY

They did not, Carol, in the end. Her sentence was commanded down from the gallows to a long imprisonment, and she served her years in the penitentiary — some sixteen of them, they say — and passed at last out of the story. But Mary Gallagher, Carol, did not pass out of it. Because a death like that, so violent and so wrong, done by a friend's hand in a poor quarter that had known too much sorrow — the people of Griffintown could not let it rest. And soon they began to say that Mary had not truly gone. That on the corner of William and Murray streets, where she died, she still walked.

CAROL

I had a feeling you would bring her back to that corner, Marty. Tell me. How does she come? What did the people of Griffintown begin to see?



MARTY

They said, Carol, that every seven years — every seventh June, on or near the anniversary of her death — Mary Gallagher returns to the corner of William and Murray. And she comes headless, Carol, just as Susan Kennedy left her, walking the corner in the dark, searching, feeling along the walls and the cobblestones for the head that was taken from her and never rightly returned. A headless woman, wandering the same few feet of Griffintown, looking for herself, every seven years without fail.

CAROL

Every seven years, still searching for her own head. Oh, Marty, that is so sorrowful — it is frightening, yes, but it is heartbreaking too. Do people truly still go? Do they still mark the year she comes?



MARTY

They do, Carol, and that is the strangest and most wonderful part of it. Griffintown itself has all but vanished — the old Irish quarter was mostly cleared away in the last century, the houses gone, the families scattered, the streets rezoned and rebuilt. And yet the legend held on. Every seven years, when Mary's night comes round, Montrealers still gather at the corner of William and Murray in the dark to wait and watch for the headless woman. They have done it for generations. The last such vigils drew real crowds, Carol — curious souls standing on a modern street corner, keeping faith with a murdered woman from 1879.

CAROL

A whole city keeping a vigil for her, all these years later, on a corner where the old houses aren't even standing anymore. Marty, why do you think she stayed with them? Why has Montreal never let Mary Gallagher go?



MARTY

I think, Carol, it is because of how alone she was. A poor Irish woman, killed by the one friend she had, over a man not worth the trouble, in a quarter the world was already forgetting. No one much protected Mary Gallagher in life. And so, in a strange and tender way, the people of Montreal decided to keep her in death — to stand on her corner every seven years so that she would never be entirely forgotten, never entirely alone in her searching. The vigil is a grim thing, yes. But underneath it, Carol, it is a kind of faithfulness. It is a city refusing to let one of its poorest daughters slip away unremembered.

CAROL

A city standing watch so she is never alone in her searching. Oh, Marty, that turns the whole fright of it warm. That is why we tell these, isn't it.

MARTY

That is exactly why, Carol. So tonight we hold Mary Gallagher, dead on a hot June night in 1879 on William Street, killed by a friend's hand in the drink and the jealousy and the heat. We remember that she was a real woman, poor and Irish and human, and that she deserved far better than she got, in life and in that terrible room. And if you are ever in Montreal on the right summer of the seventh year, and you find yourself near the corner of William and Murray in the dark,

spare a thought for the headless woman feeling along the stones — and know that you are only the latest of a long line of Montrealers who would not leave her to search alone. I'm Marty Shepard.

CAROL

And I'm Carol, and tonight my heart is on that old Griffintown corner with poor Mary Gallagher, still searching, and with all the kind souls who keep the watch for her. Hold your friends gently, and hold them true — and come back to the fire.