



DARK TALES OF QUEBEC ♦

The Empress of Ireland

An AI Wrangler illustrated story



From the film

MARTY

Come in close to the fire tonight, friends, because I want to tell you about a ship that Canada tried its best to forget. Her name was the Empress of Ireland, a great Canadian Pacific ocean liner, and on a spring night in 1914 she went down in the cold black water of the St. Lawrence River. She sank in fourteen minutes, Carol. Fourteen. And more than a thousand souls went down with her, more of her passengers than were lost on the Titanic itself. Yet hardly a soul today remembers her name.

CAROL

Fourteen minutes. Oh, Marty, I've never even heard of her, and that already breaks my heart a little. A thousand people, on our own river. How does a ship that big go down so fast?



MARTY

I'll tell you, Carol, but let me set the scene first, because the night matters. It was the twenty-eighth of May, 1914, and the Empress left Quebec City in the evening, outbound for Liverpool with near fourteen hundred people aboard. Passengers dressed for dinner, children asleep in their berths, a whole company of the Salvation Army bound for a great congress in London, their band and their families all together. She steamed down the great river through the dark, past Rimouski, toward a place called Pointe-au-Père, Father's Point, where the river pilot would leave her. And out there in the small hours, Carol, a fog came rolling up off the water. Thick as wool. A blindfold laid across the whole river.

CAROL

A fog on the river in the dark. Marty, I can just picture the men on the bridge straining to see and seeing nothing at all. Were they alone out there, or was there something else in that fog?



MARTY

There was something else, Carol. That is the whole tragedy of it. Coming up the river toward her, loaded down heavy with eleven thousand tons of coal, was a

Norwegian vessel called the Storstad, a collier, a great blunt-nosed ship built for hauling. The two ships had seen each other's lights before the fog closed in, and each thought it understood where the other was going. But then the fog swallowed them both. And in that blind white silence, Carol, the two captains each made their own guess about which way to steer, and their guesses did not agree. Whistles moaning back and forth across the water, each one closer, and neither ship truly knowing where the other one was.

CAROL

Oh, that's the part that makes my stomach drop, Marty. Two ships calling out to each other in the dark and getting it wrong. And there was nothing they could do once they saw it coming?



MARTY

Almost nothing, Carol. The Empress had all but stopped, drifting there in the murk, when out of the fog the bow of the Storstad appeared, that great coal-laden prow, coming straight for her. There was no time. The Storstad drove into the Empress's side amidships like an axe into a log, tore a wound in her low near the waterline, and the river came pouring in. Thousands of tons of water a second, Carol, flooding into her belly. And here is the cruelty of it. Many of the

watertight doors could not be closed in time, and the great gash was below the waterline where the water came fastest, so the ship began to roll onto her side almost at once.

CAROL

And all those people asleep in their berths, Marty. In the middle of the night. They wouldn't even have known. How could anyone find their way out of a ship rolling over in the dark?



MARTY

Most of them could not, Carol, and that is the horror I've carried a long time. She listed so fast and so far that within minutes the floors became walls. The portholes on the lower decks, some left open to the spring night for air, went under the surface, and the river came in through them too. People woke in pitch darkness to freezing water climbing over them, hallways tilted crazy, no way to know which way was up. Whole families trapped in their cabins. The lights failed. And the ship rolled fully onto her side, so that for a few minutes she lay there in the water like a great dying whale, and some souls actually crawled out through the portholes and stood on her hull, on the very side of the ship, out under the stars.

CAROL

They stood on the side of the ship. Oh, Marty. That's such a strange, terrible picture, people standing on the hull in their nightclothes. What happened to them, the ones who got out onto her?



MARTY

For a moment, Carol, there was a kind of desperate hope. Hundreds were in the water now, or clinging to the hull, and the Storstad, damaged but afloat, lowered her boats and began pulling people from the river. Those Norwegian sailors rowed back and forth through the wreckage in the dark and saved hundreds of lives, Carol. But the St. Lawrence in late May is snowmelt cold, cold enough to stop a strong man's heart, and the fog was still thick, and there were more than a thousand people in that water. And then the Empress gave one last groan and slipped away entirely beneath them, and the standing-place vanished, and all those souls were left in the black river together.

CAROL

The cold water again, Marty. It's always the cold water that finishes it, isn't it. And the little ones, the Salvation Army families you spoke of, the band and their children. Marty, I almost don't want to ask.



MARTY

Then I'll tell you gently, Carol. Of that whole Salvation Army company, near two hundred of them, only a handful lived. Their bandmaster was lost. Whole families were wiped from the earth in those fourteen minutes. When the count was finally made, one thousand and twelve people had died. More than a hundred and thirty of them were children. Of all the passengers who went down, only four children survived out of well over a hundred. The rescue boats and a couple of vessels that came out from Father's Point pulled the living and the dead from the water till dawn, and laid them out in rows on the pier at Rimouski, in the fog, with the families who'd waited on shore walking among them.

CAROL

A thousand and twelve. And the children, Marty. I have to just sit with that a moment by the fire. But tell me, why don't we know this? Why did a tragedy this vast just vanish from our memory?



MARTY

Because of the calendar, Carol, and nothing more. This was the end of May, 1914. And just nine weeks later, at the beginning of August, the whole world marched off into the Great War. All the newspapers, all the grief, all the attention of an entire country turned to the guns of Europe, and stayed there for four long years. The Empress of Ireland had the terrible misfortune to sink in the last quiet weeks of the old world. The Titanic had two years of peace in which to become a legend. The Empress had a few short weeks before the war swallowed her whole, and she sank a second time, Carol, down into forgetting.

CAROL

Down into forgetting. Oh, that's its own kind of tragedy on top of the first one, Marty. All those souls losing even their place in the story. Is there anyone left to remember them now?



MARTY

There is, Carol, and that's what I want to leave in your hands tonight. Down at Pointe-au-Père, at Rimouski, there stands a museum now, and a monument, keeping the names and the memory. The Salvation Army has never forgotten its lost band. And every year a few people gather at the water's edge on that May morning to remember a ship the history books skipped over. She is still down there, Carol, in the cold river, a grave for hundreds who were never brought up. So we say her name tonight so it doesn't slip away again. The Empress of Ireland, and the thousand and twelve who went down with her in fourteen minutes of fog. I'm Marty Shepard.

CAROL

And I'm Carol, and tonight my heart is down in the St. Lawrence with the sleeping families and the little children and that lost brass band. We remember you, Empress of Ireland. Say the names of your forgotten ones, hold your dear ones close in the dark, and come back to the fire.

