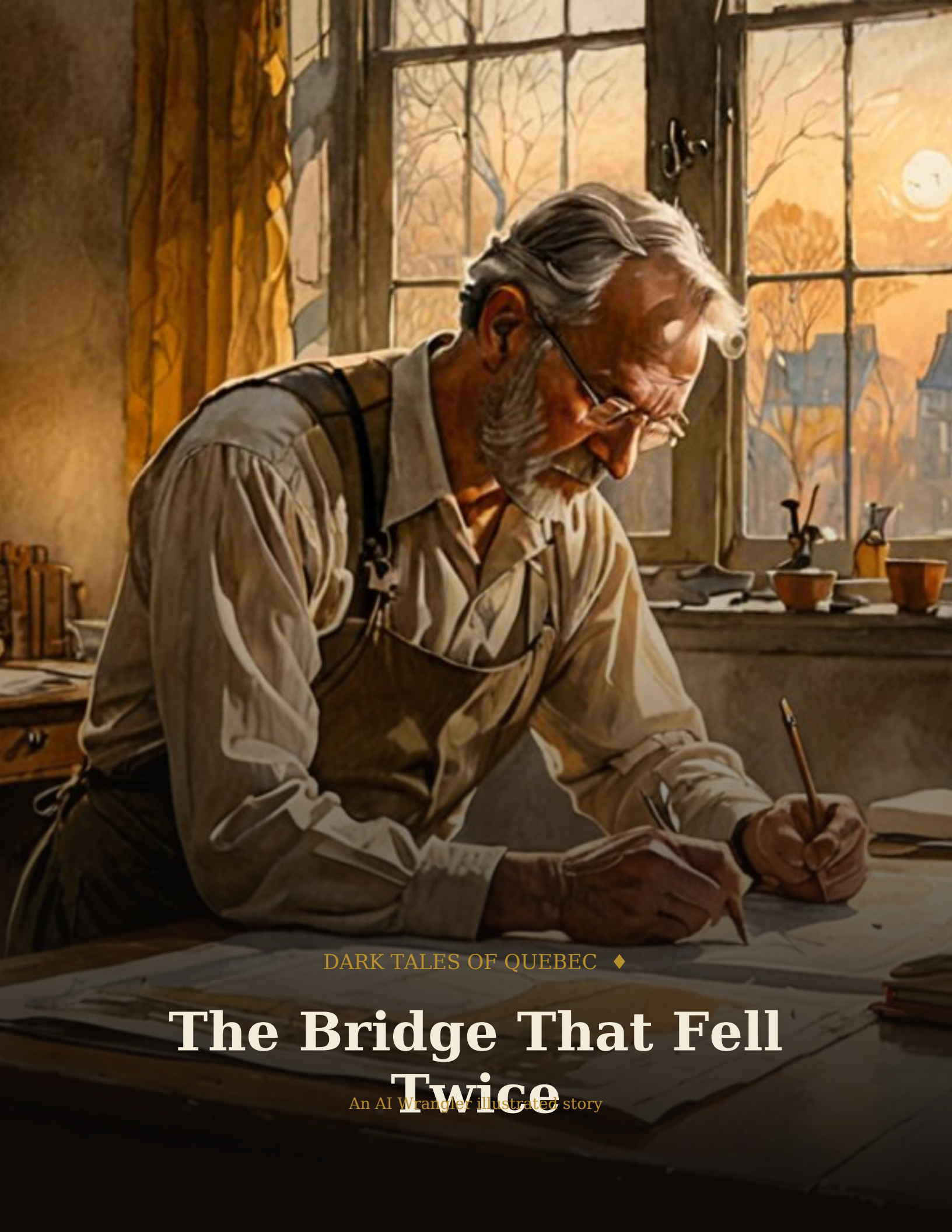




DARK TALES OF QUEBEC ♦

The Bridge That Fell Twice

An AI Wrangler illustrated story



From the film

MARTY

Settle in close tonight, friends, and put another log on, because this Quebec tale is a true one, and it is a story of great ambition and terrible sorrow. It happened on the St. Lawrence River, just upstream of Quebec City, where men set out to build the longest cantilever bridge in all the world. And it is the story of a bridge so proud and so cursed that it fell into that river not once, Carol, but twice, and took eighty-eight lives down with it.

CAROL

Oh, Marty. Twice. The same bridge, into the same river. Before you even begin I feel a shiver of dread. What was it they were trying to build out there?



MARTY

They were trying to build a wonder, Carol. In the early years of the last century, a great steel bridge to leap the St. Lawrence in one enormous span, near half a kilometre of open river with no pier in the middle to hold it, because the ice and the current would tear any pier away. The longest cantilever arms ever attempted by human hands. And the man who did the figuring, the consulting engineer, was a famous American named Theodore Cooper, proud and brilliant and aging, and he did his calculating from far away in New York, and he would not come to the river to see the thing rise.

CAROL

From far away. Oh, Marty, I don't like the sound of that. How can a man be sure of a bridge he never stands beneath?



MARTY

That, Carol, is the very heart of it. As the great south arm reached out over the water in the summer of 1907, the men on site began to notice something wrong. The huge steel chords, the compression members bearing all that weight, were bending. Bowing. They found ribs of steel that had begun to buckle where no steel should ever bend. They sent warning to Cooper. And there was hesitating, and there was arguing over whether the bends had been there before, and

precious days slipped past while thousands of tons of steel hung out over the river on a miscalculation. Cooper had underestimated the very weight of his own bridge, Carol. It was already too heavy for itself.

CAROL

Already too heavy for itself, and the men out working on it every day. Marty, did no one call them down off it?



MARTY

The word to stop came too late, Carol. On the twenty-ninth of August, 1907, near the end of the working day, with the men still out on the steel, the south arm gave way. In fifteen seconds, Carol, fifteen seconds, nineteen thousand tons of steel folded and roared down into the St. Lawrence. Men who were up on the high steel were flung into the river or carried down inside the twisting metal. The crash was heard ten miles off in Quebec City; folk thought it was thunder, or a cannon. And when the dust and the spray settled, seventy-five men were dead.

CAROL

Seventy-five. Oh, Marty. In fifteen seconds. Who were they, these men on the high steel?



MARTY

Now here, Carol, is the part that Quebec and all of Canada must never forget. A great many of those men were Mohawk ironworkers from Kahnawake, the Mohawk community just across the river from Montreal. The Kahnawake men had taken up the high steel work and become famous for it, for their steadiness and their nerve at terrible heights, and whole families of them worked that trade. And of the seventy-five who died that day, thirty-three were Mohawk men from Kahnawake. Thirty-three, Carol, from one small community, gone in a single afternoon.

CAROL

Thirty-three from one community. Marty, that is not a disaster, that is a wound to a whole people. What did it do to Kahnawake?



MARTY

It hollowed the place out, Carol. In one stroke, that village lost fathers and husbands and sons by the dozen. There is a story told there that the women, after, made a decision that the men of the community would never again all work the same high steel job at the same time, so that no single fall could ever take so many of them again. And they carried their grief in the old way and the new. To this day in Kahnawake there is a monument, crosses made of steel beams, remembering the men who fell into the St. Lawrence. The high steel trade went on, Carol, the Mohawk ironworkers went on to raise the skylines of New York and Montreal, but that August day is stitched into the memory of the whole nation.

CAROL

Steel crosses for men who fell from the steel. Oh, Marty. And yet you told me the bridge fell twice. They went back and built it again?



MARTY

They did, Carol, because the river still had to be crossed, and national pride demanded it be finished. They started fresh with a new and far heavier, stronger design, and this time the plan was cleverer still. They would build the two great cantilever arms out from each shore, and then the enormous central span, a single piece of steel weighing five thousand tons, would be built on shore, floated out on the river between the arms, and hoisted straight up into place to close the gap. A marvel of engineering. And on the eleventh of September, 1916, nine years after the first fall, they began to lift that great central span up out of the water.

CAROL

Lifting a whole span up out of the river. Marty, I can picture the crowds along the shore, everyone holding their breath. Did it hold?



MARTY

The shores were black with people, Carol, come to watch history. Up the great span rose, foot by foot, on its jacks and hangers, thousands of tons climbing slowly toward the arms waiting to receive it. And then a bearing casting on one corner failed. Just one piece of steel, Carol, at the southwest corner. The span lurched, tilted, and with a groan that the watching crowds would hear in their dreams, the whole five thousand tons slid off and plunged into the St. Lawrence and was swallowed. And thirteen more men, riding the span or working beneath it, went down into the river with it and drowned.

CAROL

Thirteen more. Oh, Marty, the same river taking them again. To watch it fall a second time, after everything. How did anyone find the heart to go on?



MARTY

I do not fully know, Carol, except that they were stubborn and they were grieving and they would not be beaten by that river. They fished up a new central span, and the next year, in 1917, they raised it again, and this time, this time, it held. The Quebec Bridge stood, the longest cantilever span in the world, and it stands to this very day, carrying trains and cars across the St. Lawrence. But it had cost, all told, eighty-eight men their lives. Seventy-five in the first fall, thirteen in the second. A bridge with a graveyard in the river beneath it.

CAROL

Eighty-eight men in the water beneath it. Marty, is there anything in this one but pride and grief? I need something to carry home from the fire.



MARTY

There is this, Carol, and it is a beautiful thing. Out of that shame and that sorrow, a lesson was pressed into the very souls of Canada's engineers. There is a ceremony in this country, quiet and solemn, called the Ritual of the Calling of an Engineer, and when a young engineer is admitted to the profession, they are given an iron ring to wear on the little finger of their working hand. And the legend, Carol, the story every engineer is told, is that those rings were forged from the twisted steel of the fallen Quebec Bridge. So that every time the young engineer picks up a pencil or reaches out a hand, that rough iron ring reminds them of the men who died when other engineers grew proud and careless. A ring made of humility.

CAROL

A ring made of humility, worn against the working hand. Oh, Marty. So the bridge that fell twice still whispers to them, all these years on, be careful, be humble, remember us.

MARTY

That is exactly it, Carol. Every engineer who wears that ring carries the St. Lawrence with them, and the seventy-five, and the thirteen. So tonight we hold them all, the men who fell into that cold river building a wonder. We hold the

thirty-three Mohawk ironworkers of Kahnawake, whose small community bore the heaviest blow of all, and whose steel crosses still stand in their memory. We remember that ambition without humility is a deadly thing, and that a poor man on the high steel pays for a proud man's mistake. And we remember that a hard lesson, carried in a ring of iron, can keep other men alive for a hundred years. I'm Marty Shepard.

CAROL

And I'm Carol, and tonight my heart is down in the St. Lawrence with those eighty-eight brave men and the community that mourns them still. Wear your own humility close, be gentle with the weight you carry, and come back to the fire.