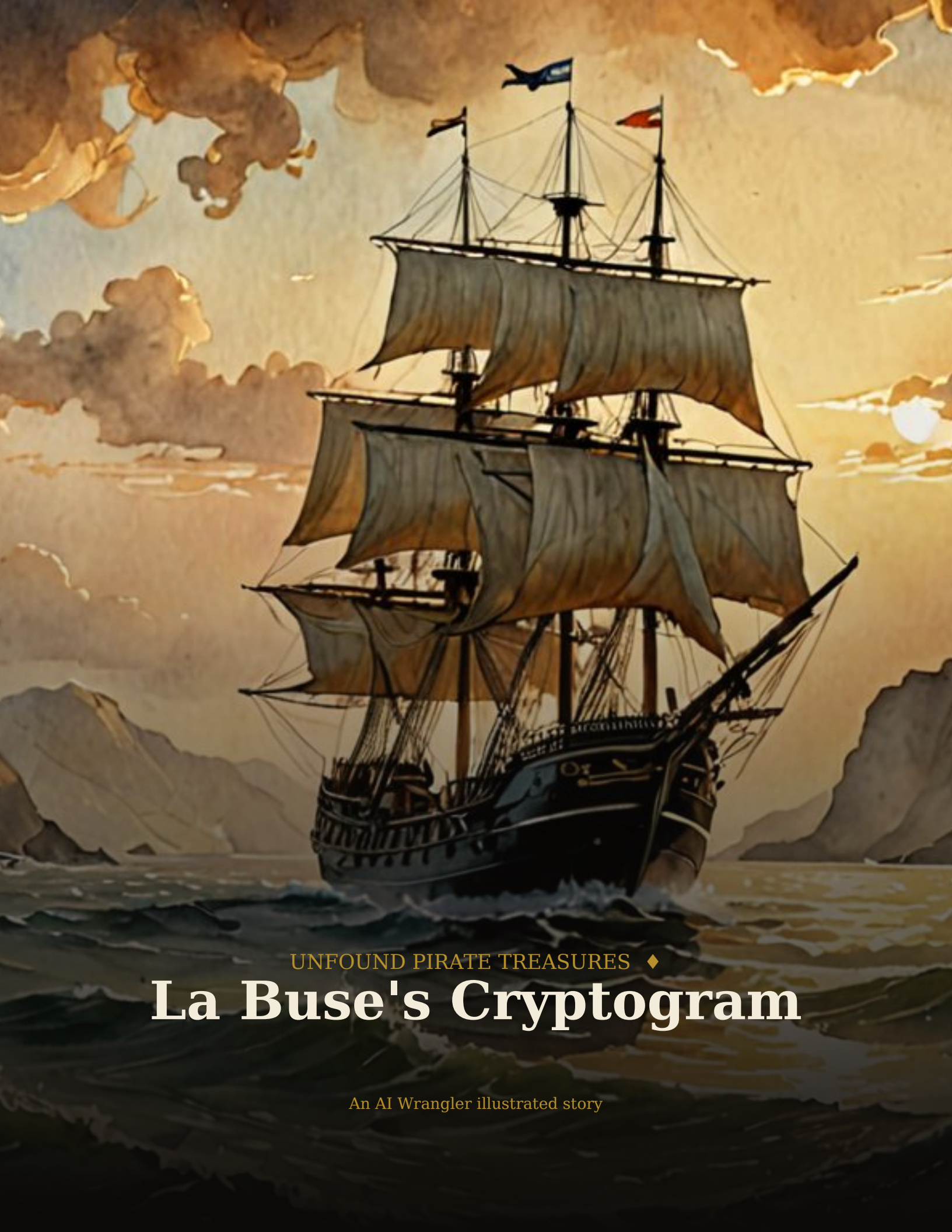




UNFOUND PIRATE TREASURES ♦

La Buse's Cryptogram

An AI Wrangler illustrated story



From the film

MARTY

Draw in close to the fire tonight, friends, and let the wind off the water do the talking, because this tale comes to us from the far side of the world, from the warm blue waters of the Indian Ocean three hundred years ago, from the age of the great pirates. It is the story of a man they called La Buse, the Buzzard, and of the richest treasure he ever took, and of a scrap of parchment he flung from the gallows with a code no living soul has ever cracked. Somewhere out there among the islands, Carol, that treasure is still waiting, and the map to it is a riddle nobody can read.

CAROL

The Buzzard. Oh, Marty, even the name has claws in it. And a treasure never found, with a code no one can break. Tell me, why did they call him such a fierce thing, this La Buse?



MARTY

They called him the Buzzard, Carol, for the speed and the fury with which he fell upon his prey. His true name was Olivier Levasseur, a Frenchman, and by all accounts an educated man, a man who could read and write and cipher, which matters greatly to our story. He came up in the wild pirate years of the early seventeen hundreds, when the Indian Ocean swarmed with sea-robbers who made their nests on the island of Madagascar and among the little green isles scattered north of it. Out of those havens the pirates would come, sails crowded on, and fall like birds of prey on the fat merchant ships plodding home from India loaded with the wealth of the East. And no bird among them was swifter or hungrier than the Buzzard.

CAROL

The wealth of the East. Marty, I can just picture those heavy ships wallowing along, fat with riches, and the pirates watching from the horizon. But you said there was one prize above all the others. What was the great ship that La Buse took?



MARTY

Now we come to it, Carol. It was April of the year seventeen twenty-one, off the island of Réunion, a green volcanic peak rising straight up out of the sea. And there, riding at anchor, wounded, lay one of the greatest prizes ever to float. She was a Portuguese great-ship, a towering carrack called the Nossa Senhora do Cabo, which means the Virgin of the Cape. She had been caught in a fearful storm rounding the bottom of Africa, and to save herself from sinking she had thrown her own cannon into the sea. So there she sat, Carol, the richest ship in the ocean, and toothless, disarmed, unable to fight. And into that bay came the Buzzard and his allies with their guns run out.

CAROL

Oh, she had thrown her own guns overboard just to stay afloat. Marty, that is a sailor's nightmare, to be the richest ship on the water and helpless. And how rich was she truly? What was aboard her?



MARTY

Carol, the cargo of that ship is the stuff that pirate dreams are made of. She was carrying home the retiring Viceroy of all Portuguese India, a great lord, and the Archbishop of Goa besides, and with them the accumulated splendor of Portugal's empire in the East. Diamonds, Carol. Pearls by the handful. Bars of gold, chests of silks and spices, and the sacred treasures of the cathedral of Goa itself. And the crown of it all, the one piece the tellers always come back to, was a cross of solid gold, seven feet tall, so heavy it took three men to carry, encrusted all over with rubies and emeralds and diamonds. They called it the Fiery Cross of Goa. Imagine it, Carol, blazing in the tropical sun as the pirates dragged it up onto the deck.

CAROL

Seven feet of solid gold, and three men to lift it. Marty, I am trying to picture that cross catching the light, and I simply cannot hold the size of it in my mind. What did all of that come to? What was it worth?



MARTY

It was one of the richest hauls in all the long history of piracy, Carol. In the money of our own day, the whole of it might come to a billion dollars. A single ship. The pirates could scarcely believe their fortune. They ran the great carrack to a quiet shore, and there on the warm sand under the palms they broke open the chests and divided the plunder, share by share, gold running through their fingers, jewels heaped on a spread sail, every rough man among them made wealthy beyond his wildest imagining. And La Buse, the Buzzard, took the lion's portion, and with it he took that fabulous fiery cross. Then he did the thing that every pirate with a fortune must do. He hid it. He sailed off among the islands, and somewhere, in some secret place, he buried a king's ransom in gold and gems. And he told no one where.

CAROL

He buried it and told no one. Oh, Marty, that is the whole ache of it, isn't it, all that beauty locked away in the dark ground. But surely a man cannot stay a pirate forever. What became of the Buzzard in the end?



MARTY

No, Carol, the sea gives and the sea takes back. The great years of piracy were ending. The navies of Europe were sweeping the Indian Ocean clean, and the old havens were no longer safe. La Buse hid himself away and lived quietly for a time, but the law is patient. In the end he was taken, and brought to the island of Réunion, the very place where he had seized his great prize nine years before, and there he was condemned to hang as a pirate. In the year seventeen thirty, on the evening of the seventh of July, they led Olivier Levasseur out to the scaffold before a great crowd. And here, Carol, is the moment the whole legend turns upon, the moment the tellers lean in close for.

CAROL

The scaffold, and a great crowd watching. Marty, my heart is in my throat. What did he do, there at the very end, with the rope waiting?



MARTY

As he stood on the scaffold, Carol, with the noose ready, La Buse reached up to his own neck and tore loose a parchment he wore there on a cord. And he flung it out over the heads of the crowd, and he cried out in a great voice, "Find my treasure, the one who may understand it!" And then they hanged him, and the Buzzard was dead. But that parchment fluttered down into the hands of the crowd, and on it, Carol, was written not words, but a cryptogram. Seventeen lines of strange little symbols, angular marks and hooks and crosses, the kind of secret alphabet they call a pigpen cipher. A coded map, in the pirate's own hand, to a billion dollars in buried gold. His last laugh, thrown to the world.

CAROL

A code thrown to the crowd from the gallows. Oh, Marty, the daring of it, the cruelty of it, to promise them everything and hand them a riddle. And in three hundred years, has no one ever read it? Has no one ever untangled the Buzzard's puzzle?



MARTY

Many have tried, Carol, and I mean many. For three centuries that cryptogram has driven men half mad. Scholars, sailors, soldiers, treasure hunters from every corner of the earth have bent over those seventeen lines of symbols, translating and retranslating, chasing hidden meanings, convinced that if they could only turn the key, the Buzzard's gold would be theirs. One man spent decades of his life and his whole fortune digging on the beaches of the Seychelles, those green islands to the north where most believe the treasure lies, following clues he swore the cipher had given him. He found strange old carvings in the rock, dogs and horses and serpents, marks he was certain the pirates had left. He dug and he dug. And Carol, he never found it. Nobody has ever found it.

CAROL

All those years, all those lives poured out over a page of little symbols. Marty, I don't know whether to call it a treasure or a curse. And the cross, the great fiery cross of Goa, gold and rubies, that is still down there too, somewhere in the dark?



MARTY

Still there, Carol, as far as any soul knows. The cipher has never been convincingly cracked, not once in three hundred years, and the treasure of the Nossa Senhora do Cabo has never been found. It lies where the Buzzard put it, under some island beach or in some sea cave among the Seychelles, the gold and the pearls and the diamonds, and that seven-foot cross of fire, waiting in the dark for the one who can read the riddle. And every so often, Carol, another dreamer takes up that old parchment full of little marks, and looks out at the blue water, and believes that this time, this time, he will be the one who may understand it. So if you ever find yourself on a warm island shore with a strange map in your hand, dig gently, and listen for the Buzzard laughing in the wind. I'm Marty Shepard.

CAROL

And I'm Carol, and tonight I'll be dreaming of blue water and palm trees and a golden cross seven feet tall lying somewhere in the dark, and of a code with seventeen lines that has kept its secret for three hundred years. Chase your treasures if you must, friends, but chase them kindly, keep the ones you love closer than any gold, and always, always come back to the fire.

