



PIRATES & PLUNDER ♦

Blackbeard's Last Stand

An AI Wrangler illustrated story



From the film

MARTY

Pull in close to the fire, friends, for tonight we hoist the black flag and sail into the golden age of piracy, and we begin with the most feared name of them all, a man who was a pirate for scarcely two years and yet became the very picture of the word forever after. His name was Edward Teach, though the world remembers him as Blackbeard, and tonight we tell of the morning the King's men finally came for him. This is the last stand of Blackbeard, Carol, and it is a bloody one.

CAROL

Blackbeard. Oh, Marty, there it is, the name every child knows. Only two years a pirate, you say? I always imagined a lifetime of it. What made a man so famous so fast?



MARTY

Theater, Carol, as much as terror. Teach understood that a frightened enemy surrenders without a fight, and a surrender without a fight means no one gets hurt and the plunder comes easy. So he built himself into a living nightmare. He was a big man to begin with, with a great thick black beard that he grew up to his very eyes and twisted into little tails with ribbons. And when he went into battle he would tuck lengths of slow-burning cannon fuse under the brim of his hat, so that his whole head wreathed itself in smoke, and out of that smoke glared his eyes and a brace of pistols across his chest. Men said the devil himself had come aboard.

CAROL

Smoke curling around his face like something out of the underworld. Marty, that is the cleverest kind of fearsome, isn't it, frightening on purpose so he needn't actually kill. Did he have a great ship to match the legend?



MARTY

He did, Carol. He took a big French vessel and mounted forty guns upon her and named her the Queen Anne's Revenge, and with her he ruled the waters off the

Carolinas and the Caribbean. And he did a thing so bold it still astonishes. In the year seventeen eighteen he sailed his flotilla right up to the harbor of Charles Town, the richest port in the southern colonies, and he blockaded it. He stopped the ships coming and going, took hostages from among the passengers, and sent word ashore that he would start sending heads to the governor unless his demands were met. And what did the terror of the seas demand, Carol? A chest of medicine.

CAROL

Medicine, of all things. Marty, that is strangely human, isn't it, the great pirate holding a whole city to ransom because his crew was sick. Did he get it?



MARTY

He got it, and sailed off unharmed, Carol, which tells you how helpless the colonies were before him. But not long after, his luck with the sea turned. He ran the Queen Anne's Revenge aground on a sandbar at an inlet and lost her, and some say he wrecked her on purpose, to thin out his own crew and keep more of the treasure for a favored few. And then Blackbeard did something surprising. He sailed up to North Carolina, and he accepted a royal pardon, and he settled down, Carol, in the town of Bath, and made himself very comfortable indeed with

a crooked governor who was happy to look the other way for a share.

CAROL

So the monster retired and made friends with the governor. Marty, I have a feeling that cozy arrangement did not sit well with everybody.



MARTY

It did not sit well at all with the governor of the neighboring colony of Virginia, a hard man named Alexander Spotswood, who did not believe a wolf ever truly changes his coat. Spotswood decided that even if Blackbeard was legally pardoned in Carolina, he would send the King's navy to end him. He gave the task to a young and determined lieutenant of the Royal Navy named Robert Maynard, and Maynard took two small sloops, crowded with sailors, and went hunting. On the night before the fight they found Blackbeard at anchor in a shallow, treacherous place called Ocracoke Inlet.

CAROL

A young lieutenant against the devil of the seas, in the pirate's own waters. Marty, my heart is in my throat. How did the battle begin?



MARTY

With cunning on both sides, Carol. At first light on the twenty-second of November, Maynard's sloops went in and promptly ran aground on the shifting sands, and Blackbeard raked them with a broadside of cannon that killed and wounded a fearful number of the sailors at once. And now Maynard did the shrewdest thing of the whole affair. He ordered most of his surviving men to go below decks and hide, and he left only himself and a couple of others visible on the bloody, shattered deck. To Blackbeard, drifting close, it looked as though the fight was all but won and the sloop was his for the boarding.

CAROL

Oh, that is a trap baited with dead men. So Blackbeard climbed aboard thinking he had won.



MARTY

He came over the rail roaring, Carol, with his boarding party, into what looked like a slaughter already finished. And Maynard blew a whistle, and up from below came the hidden sailors in a flood, and the deck erupted into the most savage hand-to-hand fight the age of piracy ever saw. Blackbeard and Maynard came face to face and fired their pistols, and then went at each other with cutlasses, and Maynard's blade snapped, and it looked for a moment as though the legend would win. But the sailors swarmed the pirate. And here, Carol, is the measure of the man's ferocity. When they finally counted, Edward Teach had taken five pistol balls in his body and near twenty deep cuts from the blades, and he was still swinging when he fell.

CAROL

Five bullets and twenty sword cuts before he went down. Marty, no wonder they thought he was more than a man. It took a whole crew and all of that to kill him.



MARTY

It did, Carol, and Maynard wanted the world to be certain of it. He had Blackbeard's head cut off and lashed to the bowsprit at the front of his ship, and he sailed home to Virginia with that grim trophy hanging over the water for all to see, and collected the bounty on it. And then the legend, which never lets a good story rest, began to grow one last dark bloom. The sailors swore that when they threw the headless body over the side, it did not simply sink. They swore it swam. Round and round the ship it went, they said, three times, before it slipped at last beneath the black water of Ocracoke.

CAROL

The headless body swimming round the ship. Marty, of course they said that, and of course we half believe it, because a man that hard to kill ought to give the sea one more turn. What is the meaning you draw from Blackbeard's end?



MARTY

This, Carol. Edward Teach built his whole terrible fame on fear, on the smoke and the beard and the reputation, and for two short years it made him a king of the water without his ever having to be the killer his legend claimed. But fear has a shelf life. Sooner or later somebody stops being afraid, somebody like a stubborn young lieutenant with a whistle and a boatload of hidden men, and then all that is left is the fight itself, and the smoke blows away. The most frightening man on the seas died on a little sloop in a shallow inlet, cut to pieces, and his head swung from a beam like a lantern. I'm Marty Shepard.

CAROL

And I'm Carol, and tonight I will be thinking of the smoke curling round that terrible face, and the young man brave enough to look through it and see only a man after all. Fear is a costume, friends, and costumes come off. Come back to the fire.

