



PIRATES & PLUNDER ♦

Bartholomew Roberts, the Pirate King

An AI Wrangler illustrated story



From the film

MARTY

Draw close again, friends, for last we spoke of the most feared pirate who ever lived, and tonight we speak of the most successful, a man far less famous than Blackbeard and yet ten times the plunderer. His name was Bartholomew Roberts, though history calls him Black Bart, and in a career of only about three years he took more than four hundred ships. No pirate before or since came close. And the strangest part, Carol, is that he never wanted to be a pirate at all.



CAROL

Four hundred ships. Marty, that is not a career, that is an industry. And he was dragged into it against his will? Tell me how a reluctant man becomes the king of all the pirates.



MARTY

He was a Welshman, Carol, a sober and skilled navigator, third mate on a slave ship off the coast of West Africa, minding his own business, when his vessel was captured by a pirate named Howell Davis. The pirates pressed the best of the captured sailors into their crew, whether they liked it or not, and Roberts liked it not at all. But then, only weeks later, Davis was killed in an ambush, and the pirate crew needed a new captain. And they looked around at this quiet, clever navigator who had been among them for barely six weeks, and they elected him. He is said to have shrugged and remarked that if he was to be a pirate, it was better to be a commander than a common man.



CAROL

Six weeks from prisoner to captain. Marty, that says something about the man, that even his captors could see the quality in him at once. And what kind of pirate king did this reluctant navigator turn out to be?



MARTY

A most unusual one, Carol. He did not carouse like the others. Black Bart drank tea, if you can believe it, when the whole crew was awash in rum, and he kept the Sabbath after a fashion, and he was said to be a man of fine and elegant dress. In battle he wore a rich crimson damask waistcoat and breeches, a hat with a red feather, a great gold chain about his neck with a diamond cross hanging from it, and a brace of pistols slung on a silk sash. He looked less like a sea robber, Carol, than like a prince going to a ball, and he fought with a cold, brilliant daring that his crews would follow anywhere.



CAROL

Tea and a diamond cross and a red feather. Marty, he sounds magnificent, like an actor who wandered onto the wrong ship and decided to run it. Did he have rules, this elegant king, or was it all chaos?



MARTY

He had a code, Carol, and this is one of the finest things about him, and about pirates in general, which surprises most folk. He drew up written articles that every man of his company had to swear to. Every man had a vote in the affairs of the moment. Every man got his fair share of the plunder, with the captain and officers taking only a little extra. Lights and candles out by eight in the evening. No gambling for money aboard. No women brought aboard in disguise. And provision made, Carol, for any man crippled in the service, a set sum of money so he would not be cast aside. It was, in its rough way, more democratic and more caring than the navy or the merchant ships these men had fled.



CAROL

A pension for the wounded and a vote for every man. Marty, I did not expect to admire a pirate's rulebook, but there it is. So he sailed under his code and took his four hundred ships. Where did all that boldness finally run out?



MARTY

Off the coast of West Africa, Carol, in February of seventeen twenty-two, and it ran out on a morning when Black Bart's luck and his cold judgment both failed him at once. A Royal Navy warship, the Swallow, under a determined captain named Chalonier Ogle, came upon his fleet. Ogle was a clever hunter. He pretended at first to flee, drawing one of Roberts' ships away and capturing it out of sight, then came back and fell upon Roberts himself. And here is the sorrowful detail. The night before had been one of hard celebration, and many of Roberts' crew were the worse for drink and slow to their stations when the fight came.



CAROL

The one rule they broke was sobriety, on the one morning it mattered most. Oh, Marty. And their elegant captain, in his crimson and his gold, what did he do?

MARTY

He did what he always did, Carol. He dressed in his finest, that crimson damask and the feathered hat and the diamond cross, and he came up on deck to fight his ship like the king he was. And in the first exchange of fire, a blast of grapeshot from the Swallow caught Bartholomew Roberts full in the throat, and he fell dead against the tackle of a gun, killed in an instant, before the real battle had scarcely begun. He was perhaps forty years old, and in three years he had become the terror of two oceans, and it was over in a heartbeat.

CAROL

Struck down in his finery in the first minutes, before he could even fight. Marty, there is something almost merciful in how quick it was, and something terribly sad too. What did his crew do, seeing their king fall?

MARTY

They did the last thing he had asked of them, Carol, for he had told them plainly that he never wished his body to be taken and hung up in chains for the crowds

to jeer at, as they did to captured pirates. So his men, even in the chaos of a losing fight, took up the body of Black Bart in all his crimson splendor, weighted it, and cast it over the side into the sea before the navy could lay a hand on it. And to this day no one knows where in those African waters the greatest pirate of them all went down. He simply vanished into the deep in his diamond cross, and the sea kept him.

CAROL

They gave him to the ocean rather than to his enemies. Marty, that is loyalty, isn't it, right to the end. And with the king dead, I imagine the golden age was dying too.

MARTY

You have put your finger on it exactly, Carol. Historians often mark the death of Bartholomew Roberts as the very end of the golden age of piracy. The navies were growing stronger, the pardons and the gallows were thinning the ranks, and when the most successful pirate who ever lived could be swept away in a single blast of grapeshot, the writing was on the wall for all the rest. The captured survivors of his crew were tried, and many hanged. The great days were done. And that is the meaning I take from Black Bart, Carol. He was proof that a pirate could be brilliant, disciplined, even principled after his fashion, and it still ended the same way, because a life built on plunder has only ever one final port. I'm Marty Shepard.

CAROL

And I'm Carol, and tonight I am thinking of the elegant Welshman in his crimson coat, sober amid all that ruin, given to the sea by loyal hands so no jeering crowd could ever have him. Live by your own code, friends, but know where the road ends, and come back to the fire.