



PIRATES & PLUNDER ♦

Captain Kidd's Trial

An AI Wrangler illustrated story



From the film

MARTY

Settle in by the fire, friends, for tonight's pirate is different from the rest, because Captain William Kidd may not have been much of a pirate at all, and yet his name became a byword for buried treasure and he died on the gallows for it. His is a story of a man crushed between the law and the powerful, and of a piece of paper that could have saved his life and mysteriously disappeared. This is the trial of Captain Kidd, Carol, and it is a story about who really pays when the mighty need a scapegoat.

CAROL

A pirate who wasn't really a pirate, hanged all the same. Marty, that already sounds like an injustice. Who was Kidd before all the trouble?



MARTY

He was a respectable man, Carol, that is the wonder of it. William Kidd was a Scottish sea captain living in New York, a married man of property, well thought of. And in the sixteen nineties he was given a most respectable commission indeed. Powerful lords in England, and even a nod from the King, backed him to go out as a privateer. Now mark that word, Carol, privateer, for it is the whole hinge of the tale. A privateer was a legal pirate, a private captain licensed by the government to attack the ships of the enemy and to hunt down actual pirates, and to share the takings with his powerful backers.

CAROL

So he set out with the law and the lords on his side, to catch pirates, not to be one. Marty, how does a man like that end up on the wrong end of a rope?



MARTY

Everything went wrong at once, Carol. He sailed for the Indian Ocean in a fine ship called the Adventure Galley, but sickness and bad luck thinned his crew, and the men he had were a hard and mutinous lot who had signed on for plunder and were finding none. Month after month they took nothing, and the crew grew ugly and dangerous, muttering of mutiny. And in that pressure Kidd made his fatal choice. He fell upon a great merchant ship called the Quedagh Merchant, heavy

with cargo, and took her as a prize.

CAROL

But if he was licensed to take enemy ships, why was that a crime?



MARTY

Because of the flags and the papers, Carol, and here is the fine and deadly legal point. The Quedagh Merchant was sailing under passes from the French, and France was England's enemy, so on paper she was a lawful prize, and Kidd carefully kept those French passes to prove it. But the ship was in truth captained by an Englishman and her cargo belonged in part to powerful merchants with friends in high places, and the taking of her caused an uproar all the way back to London. Suddenly the man who had gone out to catch pirates was being cried up as the greatest pirate of them all, and the powerful lords who had backed him found his name had become poison.

CAROL

And so the men who sent him out to do exactly this were the very ones who needed him to be guilty. Marty, I can feel the trap closing. What did poor Kidd do?



MARTY

He did the thing that should have saved him, Carol, and it damned him instead. He sailed back toward the American colonies still believing that his powerful backers would protect him, for after all he had only done what they had licensed him to do, and he had the French passes to prove the Quedagh Merchant was a lawful prize. And along the way, near an island off Long Island called Gardiners Island, he buried a portion of his treasure, gold and silver, meaning it as a bargaining chip, a bit of insurance. That buried chest, Carol, is the very seed of every buried-pirate-treasure story that has haunted the world ever since, because Kidd's was real, and it was dug up.

CAROL

The real buried treasure that started a thousand tales. Marty, so at least the treasure was found. Did it help him?



MARTY

It helped hang him, Carol. His backers, far from protecting him, turned on him utterly to save their own necks and reputations. He was arrested in Boston, thrown in a foul prison, and shipped across the ocean to London to stand trial, less as a defendant than as a sacrifice. And now comes the darkest and most suspicious turn of the whole affair. The one thing that could prove his innocence, that the Quedagh Merchant had been a lawful French prize, was those French passes he had so carefully kept. And at his trial, Carol, those passes could not be found. They had vanished from the government's own papers.

CAROL

The evidence that could have cleared him simply disappeared from the hands of the very people who wanted him convicted. Oh, Marty, that is no accident.



MARTY

Few believe it was, Carol. And here is the coda that turns the stomach. More than two hundred years later, long after Kidd was dust, those very French passes were discovered, misfiled away in the British archives all along. The proof had existed the whole time. But at the trial in seventeen oh one it was nowhere to be had, and without it Kidd stood defenseless. He was convicted not only of piracy but of the murder of one of his own crewmen, a gunner named William Moore, whom Kidd had struck on the head with a heavy wooden bucket in a quarrel during those desperate, mutinous months.

CAROL

So they had him on the piracy with the evidence hidden, and on the killing of his own man in a moment of rage. Marty, tell me about the end. I fear it was a hard one.



MARTY

It was hard even by the standards of the age, Carol. They took him to Execution Dock at Wapping, on the edge of the Thames, where they hanged pirates at the low-water mark so the tide would wash three times over the body. And when they dropped him, the rope broke, and Captain Kidd fell to the mud alive. A merciful world might have taken that as a sign. This world simply hauled him up and hanged him a second time, and that time it held. And then, to make an example that no sailor could miss, they coated his body in tar, bound it in iron bands, and hung it in a cage down by the river's mouth, where it swung for years as a warning to every man who sailed past.

CAROL

Hanged twice, and then left to rot in a cage over the water. Marty, whatever he did or did not do, that is a terrible amount of vengeance for one man. What is the meaning you take from Captain Kidd?



MARTY

This, Carol, and it is why his story sits a little apart from the swaggering tales of Blackbeard and Black Bart. William Kidd was very likely no great pirate at all, only an ordinary man given an impossible job by powerful people, who made a bad decision under terrible pressure and then trusted the mighty to stand by him. And the mighty, when the wind changed, needed a neck to hang the whole scandal on, and his was closest. The evidence that could have saved him went conveniently missing. He died so that greater men could keep their reputations and their gold. And the only treasure of his that anyone ever truly found was the little he buried out of fear, which became, of all things, the legend that made him immortal. I'm Marty Shepard.

CAROL

And I'm Carol, and tonight I am thinking of a respectable captain who trusted the powerful and learned too late that the powerful do not hang beside you. Keep your own proof close, friends, and be wary whose promises you sail on. Come back to the fire.

