



PIRATES & PLUNDER ♦

# The Pirate Republic of Nassau

An Al Wrangler illustrated story



From the film

### MARTY

Gather in close, friends, for tonight we tell not of one pirate but of a whole city of them, a lawless little kingdom on a sunny island where for a dozen wild years the black flag flew over the harbor and no king's writ ran at all. On the island of New Providence in the Bahamas, in a ramshackle port called Nassau, the pirates built themselves a home, and they half-jokingly called it a republic. This is the rise and fall of the Pirate Republic, Carol, the beating heart of the whole golden age.

### CAROL

A whole town of pirates, governing themselves. Marty, I did not know such a place ever truly existed outside of stories. How did it come to be?



### MARTY

Out of the wreckage of a war, Carol, and a very good harbor. Nassau sat perfectly placed astride the shipping lanes where the treasure of the Americas flowed back toward Europe, and its harbor was just deep enough for the pirates' small, nimble sloops but too shallow for the great warships of the navy to come in after them. When a long war ended around seventeen fifteen, it threw thousands of hard, trained sailors and privateers out of work all at once, men who knew only the sea and the gun. And they drifted to Nassau, where there was no governor, no law, no one to stop them, and they simply took the place over.

#### CAROL

So the harbor kept the navy out, and a war set all those fighting men loose with nothing to do. Marty, it is almost as if the age built its own pirate den on purpose. Who ruled this republic, if there was no law?



#### MARTY

No one ruled it, Carol, and everyone did, and that was the strange charm of the place. The pirates governed themselves by a rough code, much as they did aboard their ships, by vote and by custom and by the sharp edge of reputation. The great captains of the age all passed through and made it their base. Benjamin Hornigold, one of the first and craftiest. Charles Vane, cruel and

defiant. Calico Jack Rackham, and with him in time Anne Bonny and Mary Read. And a young man learning his trade under Hornigold who would soon become the most feared of them all, a fellow named Edward Teach, whom the world would come to know as Blackbeard.

#### CAROL

They were all there together, in one town. Marty, it must have been the most dangerous and the most alive place on earth. What was it actually like to walk its streets?



#### MARTY

A glorious, filthy, roaring shambles, Carol, by every account. Nassau had no fine buildings to speak of, mostly tents and driftwood shacks and the burned-out ruins of an old fort, and it stank in the heat, and it rang day and night with drinking and gambling and fighting and the spending of stolen gold. But for the men who lived there it was something they had never had anywhere else. A merchant sailor or a navy man lived under brutal discipline, cheated of his pay, flogged at an officer's whim. In Nassau he was free, he had a vote, he shared the plunder fairly, and he answered to no lord on earth. It was a hard and violent freedom, but it was freedom, and they loved it fiercely.

#### CAROL

A rough freedom they could get nowhere else. Marty, I begin to understand why they clung to it. But a place like that, thumbing its nose at the King and choking the trade routes, surely the crown could not let it stand forever.



#### MARTY

It could not, Carol, and the King at last found exactly the right man to end it. His name was Woodes Rogers, and he was no ordinary official. He had himself been a daring privateer captain, a man who had sailed clear around the world and rescued a marooned sailor whose story helped inspire the tale of Robinson Crusoe. Rogers knew the sea and he knew hard men. And in seventeen eighteen the crown made him the first royal governor of the Bahamas and sent him to Nassau, not merely with warships, but with something cleverer. He carried the King's pardon.

#### CAROL

A pardon, not just cannon. Marty, that is shrewd, isn't it, offering the carrot and the stick at once. How did the pirates take it?



#### **MARTY**

It split them right down the middle, Carol, which was exactly the point. When Rogers sailed into that harbor, many of the pirates, tired men who could see which way the wind was finally blowing, came forward and swore the oath and took the pardon and gave up the life. Old Benjamin Hornigold not only took the pardon but turned pirate hunter, and went out to catch his former friends for the crown. But the fierce ones would not bend. Charles Vane, defiant to the last, is said to have set a captured ship ablaze and sent it drifting at Rogers' fleet in the night, and then slipped out of the harbor with his guns blazing rather than kneel, and fled to keep up the old life a while longer.

#### **CAROL**

So some knelt and some ran, and the republic simply came apart from the inside. Marty, there is something both triumphant and sad in that. Did Rogers make it stick?



#### MARTY

He made it stick, Carol, though it nearly killed him to do it. He rebuilt the fort, he faced down threats and disease and near mutiny, he hanged the pirates who broke their word and went back to the account, and slowly, stubbornly, he brought the rule of law to that wild harbor. And when it was done, the town of Nassau took a new motto for itself, a proud line in Latin that you can still find tied to the Bahamas to this day. *Expulsis piratis, restituta commercia*. The pirates expelled, commerce restored. The pirate republic was over.

#### CAROL

The pirates expelled, commerce restored. Marty, in a few Latin words, the whole end of an era. And the great captains who had made the place, what became of them all?



#### **MARTY**

They scattered to the fates we have been telling all season, Carol. Blackbeard sailed off to his bloody last stand at Ocracoke. Vane was eventually caught and hanged. Calico Jack and his two women pirates were run down off Jamaica. The free city that had launched them all emptied out, and within a very few years the golden age itself was guttering to its end. Nassau became just another orderly colonial port, and the roaring, stinking, gloriously free pirate republic passed into legend, gone almost as suddenly as it had risen.

#### **CAROL**

Risen from a war and a good harbor, and swept away by one clever man with a pardon in his hand. Marty, what is the meaning you take from the whole rise and fall of it?



#### MARTY

This, Carol. The pirate republic is a mirror, and what you see in it depends on where you stand. Look one way and it is a den of thieves and cruel men, a plague on honest trade that richly deserved to be swept away, and so it was. But look another way and you see a few thousand of the age's most abused and disposable men, sailors treated like cattle by their betters, who carved out one brief place on earth where they could be free and equal and answer to no master, and they held it for a dozen roaring years before the world closed its fist. Both things are true at once, Carol. That is why we still tell it. I'm Marty Shepard.

#### CAROL

And I'm Carol, and tonight I am thinking of that ramshackle harbor full of black flags, and the fierce, doomed, hard-won freedom of the men who built it. Freedom is a wild thing, friends, and it is never held for long. Come back to the fire.

