



PIRATES & PLUNDER ♦

Stede Bonnet, the Gentleman Pirate

An AI Wrangler Illustrated story



From the film

MARTY

Come in close, friends, for tonight's pirate is the oddest of the whole rogues' gallery, a man who had no business at all upon the account, no need of money, no skill at the sea, and no talent for cruelty, and who threw away a comfortable life to fly the black flag anyway. His name was Stede Bonnet, and history calls him the Gentleman Pirate, and his tale is part comedy and part tragedy, and wholly strange. Settle in, Carol, for the pirate who did everything wrong.

CAROL

A gentleman who chose to become a pirate for no reason at all. Marty, that goes against everything we have heard all season. Who was he before this madness took him?



MARTY

He was about the last man on earth you would expect, Carol. Stede Bonnet was a wealthy and educated landowner on the sunny island of Barbados, a retired army major with a fine plantation, a respectable position in society, a wife, and children. He wanted for nothing. He had never sailed a ship in anger in his life, knew next to nothing of navigation or gunnery or the hard trade of the sea. And one day, in the year seventeen seventeen, this settled middle-aged gentleman simply decided to become a pirate, and set about it in the most gentlemanly and wrong-headed way imaginable.

CAROL

I have to ask the question everyone is thinking, Marty. Why? What makes a rich man with a family run off to rob ships?



MARTY

No one knows for certain, Carol, and that is part of the fun and the sadness of it. The unkind story, whispered even in his own day, was that Major Bonnet was fleeing a difficult and nagging wife, and that he preferred the perils of the open sea to another evening at his own dinner table. Others think it was a kind of restlessness, what we might now call a crisis of the middle years, a respectable man aching for one wild adventure before the end. Whatever it was, Carol, he did

the thing no real pirate ever did. He did not steal a ship. He bought one, out of his own pocket, a fine sloop he named the Revenge. And he did not lure a crew with promises of plunder. He hired them, and paid them wages, like a shopkeeper.

CAROL

He bought his pirate ship and paid his pirates a salary. Marty, that is so absurd it is almost sweet. It is like a man playing at pirates with real money. How did he possibly fare out there?



MARTY

Badly, Carol, at first, and then worse. He had some early luck robbing a few merchant ships off the American coast, more by boldness than by skill. But he did not know how to handle his vessel or his men, and it showed. And then his fortunes took a turn that would prove the ruin of him. He fell in with the most famous pirate of the age, none other than Blackbeard himself. And Blackbeard took one look at this bumbling gentleman amateur, and saw an opportunity.

CAROL

Oh, Marty, no. Putting poor clumsy Stede Bonnet next to Blackbeard is like putting a lamb next to a wolf. What did Blackbeard do to him?



MARTY

He fleeced him, gently and completely, Carol. Blackbeard, all charm, suggested that Bonnet, being a gentleman unused to the hard labor of command, should come aboard Blackbeard's own ship as a guest and take his ease, and let one of Blackbeard's officers handle the tiresome business of captaining the Revenge. And Bonnet, flattered, agreed. And so the Gentleman Pirate found himself a passenger on another man's ship while Blackbeard quietly ran his sloop and his crew for him. He had been relieved of his command as neatly as a purse is lifted at a fair, and he scarcely seemed to notice until it was done.

CAROL

He was captain of nothing on his own ship, a guest in his own adventure. Marty, my heart genuinely aches for the man. Did he ever get free of Blackbeard?



MARTY

He did, Carol, after Blackbeard finally cast him and his crew loose. And for a moment there was a chance of a soft landing. A pardon was being offered to pirates who would give up the life, and Stede Bonnet took it, and might have sailed quietly home to Barbados and his plantation and even his difficult wife, an eccentric old story to tell at dinner. But the pull of the account had gotten into him, Carol. He could not let it go. He went back to piracy, and to dodge the terms of his pardon he took on a foolish alias. He began calling himself Captain Thomas, as if a false name could hide a face already known up and down the coast.

CAROL

He had his way out and he turned back to the sea. Marty, that is the tragedy showing through the comedy now, isn't it. A man who could not stop. How did it end for Captain Thomas?



MARTY

It ended in a long, desperate fight in a river, Carol. The colony of South Carolina, sick of pirates preying on its trade, sent out a determined militia colonel named William Rhett to hunt Bonnet down. Rhett cornered him at the mouth of the Cape Fear River, and there they fought a grinding battle among the sandbars, both sides running aground, blazing away at each other for hours across the mud as the tide shifted. In the end Bonnet's men were beaten and taken, and the Gentleman Pirate was hauled to Charleston in chains to stand trial for his life.

CAROL

Run aground in the mud and finally taken. Marty, given how gentle and hapless he was, surely a court might have shown him some mercy?



MARTY

You would think so, Carol, and his story nearly took one more strange turn, for he actually escaped from his confinement in Charleston and was on the run for a short while before being recaptured. But the judge who tried him, a stern man named Nicholas Trott, had no mercy to spare. Piracy was a plague on the colony's lifeblood, and an example had to be made, gentleman or no gentleman. Trott convicted him and sentenced him to hang. And it is said that Stede Bonnet, who had begun his piracy almost as a lark, went to pieces at the end, weeping and pleading and utterly broken, all his gentleman's dignity gone. And in December of seventeen eighteen they hanged him in Charleston, this retired major who had thrown away everything for a taste of the pirate life.

CAROL

Weeping at the last, all the play gone out of the game. Oh, Marty, that is a hard, sad picture. What are we to make of Stede Bonnet, of all these wild men the least suited to the life he chose?



MARTY

I find him the most human of the lot, Carol, and the most cautionary. Blackbeard and Black Bart were made for the account, hard men in a hard trade. But Stede Bonnet was one of us, an ordinary comfortable person who looked at his safe and respectable life and found it unbearable, and hungered so badly for adventure and escape that he sailed straight past every warning into a world he had no gift for at all. There is a little of that hunger in most of us, Carol, the itch to blow up the settled life and run off to sea. Bonnet is the fellow who actually did it, and his end reminds us why most of us, wisely, only dream it. I'm Marty Shepard.

CAROL

And I'm Carol, and tonight I am thinking of the gentleman major who paid wages to his pirates and lost his ship to a smiling wolf, and threw away a whole good life for one wild dream. Mind the difference between the dream and the doing, friends. Come back to the fire.

