



PIRATES & PLUNDER ♦

Ching Shih, Terror of the Seas

An AI Wrangler illustrated story



From the film

MARTY

For the last tale of our pirate season, friends, draw in close, because we have saved the greatest for the end, and the greatest pirate who ever lived was not Blackbeard, nor Black Bart, nor any of the swaggering men of the Caribbean. The most successful pirate in all of history was a woman, half a world away, who commanded more ships and more men than most nations owned, who fought off three empires, and who did the one thing almost no pirate ever managed. She retired, rich and free and unpunished, and died an old woman in her bed. Her name, Carol, was Ching Shih.

CAROL

The greatest pirate who ever lived was a woman, and she won. Oh, Marty, after a whole season of gallows and shipwrecks, tell me everything. Where does her story begin?



MARTY

It begins in the most unlikely place, Carol, in the floating brothels of the southern Chinese port of Canton, at the turn of the eighteen hundreds, where a young woman worked whose given name is lost to us. What we know is that she was clever, and strong-willed, and she caught the eye of a powerful pirate captain named Cheng, or Zheng, who ruled a growing fleet in the South China Sea. He married her, and here is the first sign of the woman she was. She did not marry into a life of leisure. She demanded an equal share in the business and an equal hand in command, and she got it, and together they built their scattered pirate bands into a single mighty confederation.

CAROL

She negotiated herself into a full partnership before she would even wed him. Marty, that is a formidable woman before the story has even begun. What happened to the husband?



MARTY

He died, Carol, lost at sea in a storm around the year eighteen oh seven, and by every ordinary expectation his fleet should have splintered into a dozen quarreling pieces, as pirate empires always do when the strong man falls. But it did not. His widow moved with breathtaking speed and skill. She secured the loyalty of the key captains, made a shrewd alliance with her late husband's adopted son and right hand, a brilliant young commander, and within a very short time she had taken personal command of the entire confederation herself. And what a thing it was that she now commanded, Carol.

CAROL

Tell me the size of it, Marty. You keep hinting, and I cannot picture it yet.



MARTY

Then picture this, Carol, and it will stagger you. At its height, the fleet of Ching Shih numbered in the many hundreds of ships, by some accounts well over a thousand vessels, from great ocean-going junks bristling with cannon down to little river craft. And the men and women under her command numbered in the tens of thousands, by some reckonings as many as seventy or eighty thousand souls. No pirate of the Caribbean ever dreamed of such power. Blackbeard commanded a few hundred men at most. Ching Shih commanded an army and a navy that could challenge the Chinese empire itself, and she ruled the whole coast of southern China, taxing shipping, controlling whole villages, a shadow government upon the sea.

CAROL

Tens of thousands of pirates under one woman's hand. Marty, how does a person even hold such a force together? The men of the Caribbean could barely keep one crew from mutiny.



MARTY

By law, Carol, and iron discipline, and this is the part I most want you to hear. Ching Shih governed her enormous fleet by a strict written code, and she enforced it without mercy, and some of her laws would surprise you. To steal from the common fund, or to give an order of your own without her leave, meant death. To desert or go absent meant the loss of your ears, or your life. And here is the law that sets her apart from nearly every pirate we have spoken of all season. She laid down fierce protections for the women who were captured. A pirate who harmed a captive woman against her will was put to death, no excuses, no exceptions. In the middle of the most violent trade on earth, this pirate queen ran the tightest and, in that one respect, the most principled ship of all.

CAROL

A pirate who protected captured women on pain of death. Marty, after some of what we heard earlier this season, that lands hard and it lands well. So the empire tried to stop her, I imagine, with all that power in her hands.



MARTY

They tried with everything they had, Carol, and they failed and failed again. The imperial Chinese navy went out against her and was beaten so badly that she captured their ships and folded them into her own fleet, so that fighting her only made her stronger. The Portuguese, with their base at Macau, went against her, and could not break her. Even the mighty British, the greatest sea power on earth, are said to have taken an interest, and still she held the coast. For years the terror of the South China Sea was simply undefeatable, and the empire that could not crush her at last began to wonder if there might be another way to be rid of her.

CAROL

If you cannot beat her, you must deal with her. Marty, is this where the miracle happens, the ending you promised where she actually gets away with it?



MARTY

This is where it happens, Carol, and it is a masterpiece of knowing when to stop, which is the one thing almost no pirate in history ever learned. Around the year eighteen ten, with her fleet still powerful but with cracks beginning to show, a rivalry brewing among her captains, the empire offered a general amnesty, a pardon to any pirate who would give up the life. And Ching Shih did not sail away defiant like Charles Vane, to be hunted down and hanged. She did not fight to the last like Blackbeard. She went, herself, to negotiate, and she negotiated like the shrewd businesswoman she had always been.

CAROL

She walked in to bargain with the empire that had spent years trying to destroy her. Marty, the coolness of it. What terms did she win?



MARTY

Terms almost no defeated enemy in history has ever won, Carol. She and the great mass of her pirates received full pardons. They were allowed to keep their plunder, their ill-gotten fortune, free and clear. Many of her men, and her adopted-son commander whom by now she had married, were even given positions in the imperial military, their piracy transformed into respectable service with a stroke of the brush. And Ching Shih herself walked away a wealthy, free, and untouched woman, the pardon in her hand and her fortune in her purse, having beaten the empire not with cannon in the end, but with cunning at the bargaining table.

CAROL

She kept the treasure, saved her men, and strolled out under a full pardon. Marty, I did not think that was allowed to happen in a pirate story. What did she do with the rest of her life?



MARTY

She did the most gloriously ordinary thing imaginable, Carol. She retired. She settled down in Canton and, by the accounts that come to us, ran a gambling house, a comfortable and profitable business, and lived out a long and peaceful life as a respected matron, a wife, a mother, and a grandmother. She died in her bed at around seventy years of age, in the eighteen forties, wealthy and safe, surrounded by family, having never spent a day on a gallows or in a cage or beneath the waves. The most powerful pirate in the history of the world died of old age, at home, having gotten clean away with all of it.

CAROL

Died an old grandmother in her own bed, rich and free. Marty, after Kidd in his cage and Blackbeard's head on the bowsprit, I can hardly believe the season ends here. What is the meaning you take from Ching Shih?



MARTY

This, Carol, and it is the perfect note to close our pirate fire upon. Every swaggering man we have met this season was undone in the end by the same failing, the inability to stop. They wanted one more prize, one more year on the account, and the sea or the noose took them for it. Ching Shih was greater than all of them, commanded more, fought better, ruled longer, and she alone understood that the whole point of winning is to be able to walk away while you still can. She looked at her fortune and her power and her enemies, and she knew the moment, and she took the deal, and she went home. Strength took her to the top, Carol. But it was wisdom, knowing when the game was won, that let her keep it. I'm Marty Shepard.

CAROL

And I'm Carol, and tonight I am thinking of the pirate queen who commanded a thousand ships and was smart enough to trade them all for a long quiet life by the harbor she once terrorized. Know when you have won, friends, and have the wisdom to walk away. That is the end of our pirate season, so bank the fire, sleep warm, and come back to us soon.