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DARKWATER DREADFUL

Pirate Tales and other BS

BLACKBEARD

or,

THE FURY FROM HELL



"Imagination cannot form an idea of a fury from hell to look more frightful."

Being a True and Terrible Account of Captain Edward Teach, the Most Wicked Pyrate that ever Sailed the Atlantick. As the Ballad-Sellers Would Have It.

Chapter the First

The Devil at the Harbour Mouth

Gentle reader, if your nerves are weak, set this paper down at once and go read your Bible. What follows is not for the faint of heart.

It was the month of May, in the year of our Lord 1718, and the good people of Charles-Town, in the Province of Carolina, woke to find the Devil sitting at the mouth of their harbour.

Four ships rode across the channel. The greatest of them was a black-hulled terror bristling with guns, called the *Queen Anne's Revenge*. And on her deck stood the man the whole Atlantick feared to name.

He was tall and spare, and his beard grew black as a coal pit. It was so long and so thick that it covered his face clear up to his eyes. He twisted it into little tails and tied each one with ribbon, like a lady dressing for a ball. But there was nothing ladylike about what came next.

When he meant to fight, he lit slow matches, the kind men use to fire a cannon, and tucked them under the brim of his hat. They hung burning on either side of his face. Smoke curled about his head, and his eyes glowed out of it like two coals. Across his chest he wore a sling with three brace of pistols, hanging ready like a soldier's bandolier.

It was said that imagination could not form an idea of a fury from hell to look more frightful.

This was Captain Edward Teach. The sailors called him Blackbeard.

For the better part of a week, not one ship went in or out of Charles-Town without his leave. Eight or nine vessels he took, one after another, like a fox in a henhouse. One of them carried passengers bound for London. Among them was Mr. Samuel Wragg, a gentleman of the Governor's own Council, and his little son William, scarcely four years old.

Blackbeard had them brought before him. The gentleman trembled. The boy wept. The pirate only smiled into the smoke.

Then he sent his men ashore under a flag of truce, with a message for Governor Robert Johnson. The message was plain. Give the pirates what they asked, or they would murder every prisoner aboard, send the heads to the Governor, and set every captured ship ablaze.

The whole town held its breath. Shutters were barred. Mothers hid their children. In the council chamber, grave men in powdered wigs argued until their candles burned down to nothing.

And what did the Devil want? Gold? Silver? Rubies by the bucket? The Governor's own daughter?

No, gentle reader. What Blackbeard demanded was stranger than any of these. And if Charles-Town refused him, every soul in his hold would pay for it...

To be continued.

Chapter the Second

The Wreck at Topsail, and the Fourteenth Bride

The ransom was sent. The prisoners came home alive, though a good deal lighter in the purse than when they left. And Blackbeard sailed north, laughing, with a whole colony's terror stowed in his hold.

But the fiend was not finished. He was only getting started on his wickedest trick of all.

At Topsail Inlet, on the North Carolina coast, he told his crew the great ship must be brought in and cleaned. Then, on purpose and with a straight face, he ran the *Queen Anne's Revenge* hard upon the sandbar. When his sloop *Adventure* came to help, she struck the bar as well, as if by accident. Both ships stuck fast.

Now see the Devil's cunning! With his fleet ruined and his men confused, Blackbeard loaded the best of the plunder onto a little sloop with a few chosen friends. The rest of his company he left behind on that lonely shore to shift for themselves. Fewer men, he reckoned, meant fewer shares.

Then this wolf put on sheep's clothing. He sailed up to Bath Town, bowed low before Governor Charles Eden, and swore on his honour that he was done with piracy forever. The Governor granted him the King's pardon and a certificate to prove it. Blackbeard was, on paper, an honest man.

An honest man with very strange habits.

He took a bride. She was a planter's girl of sixteen, and the Governor's own people saw them married. It was whispered in the taverns that she was his fourteenth wife, and that a dozen of the others still lived.

Once, far out at sea and deep in his rum, he cried to his crew, "Come, let us make a hell of our own, and try how long we can bear it!" He drove his men into the hold, shut the hatches, and set pots of brimstone burning. The men choked and clawed at the boards and begged for air. Blackbeard sat in the yellow smoke and laughed. He was the last to climb out, and he was proud of it.

Another night, drinking in his cabin with his sailing master, Israel Hands, he quietly drew two pistols beneath the table. He blew out the candle, crossed his hands, and fired. The ball took Israel Hands through the knee and lamed him for life. When his men asked why, Blackbeard said that if he did not now and then kill one of them, they would forget who he was.

Such was the "honest man" of Bath Town.

But up the coast, in the Governor's Palace at Williamsburg, another man was watching. Governor Alexander Spotswood of Virginia did not believe in honest pirates. In secret, telling almost no one, he signed a proclamation. One hundred pounds for Edward Teach, commonly called Blackbeard. Dead or alive.

Two small sloops slipped out of the James River under Lieutenant Robert Maynard of the Royal Navy. They carried no great guns. Only men, muskets, and blades.

And on the night of the twenty-first of November, 1718, they found him…

To be continued.

Chapter the Third

Teach's Hole

Blackbeard lay at anchor at Ocracoke, in a narrow channel the locals still call Teach's Hole. He had been warned the navy was coming. He did not care. He sat up all night with his men, drinking, as easy as a man at his own fireside.

Someone asked him, in the dark, whether his wife knew where his treasure was buried, in case he should fall. Blackbeard answered that nobody but himself and the Devil knew where it was, and the longest liver should take all.

At first light, Maynard's two sloops crept into the inlet. Blackbeard rose, raised a cup to them across the water, and roared out a toast. "Damnation seize my soul if I give you quarter, or take any from you!"

Maynard shouted back that he expected no quarter, and would give none.

Blackbeard's guns spoke first. His broadside tore into the navy sloops and cut down men where they stood. Maynard's decks ran red. Seeing so few left standing, Blackbeard laughed, and led his boarding party over the rail.

It was a trap.

Maynard had hidden his men below. Up they poured from the hold, shouting, and the deck became a slaughterhouse. Blackbeard and Maynard found each other in the smoke. Both fired. Then it was steel on steel.

Blackbeard was shot. He did not fall. He was cut, and cut again. He did not fall. Blood soaked his famous beard until it hung like wet black rope. Still he fought, swinging his cutlass, roaring like the Devil himself come up through the planks.

Five and twenty wounds he took, and five of them by shot. At last, as he was cocking yet another pistol, the great pirate fell dead upon the deck.

Maynard cut off his head and hung it from the bowsprit of his sloop. The body was heaved over the side into the black water.

And here, gentle reader, is the most dreadful part of all. They say the headless body would not sink. They say it swam around the ship three times, searching for its head, before the sea finally took it.

His treasure has never been found. Only he and the Devil knew where it lay.

And the Devil is not telling.

THE END.

Next Sunday: two women, one pirate crew, and the noose they cheated. Do not miss it.

THE RECORD

What's true, and what's BS

The tale above is the legend, told the way the cheap papers loved it. Here is what the record actually says.

The ransom was a chest of medicine. In May 1718, Blackbeard blockaded Charleston for about a week, took eight or nine ships, and held prisoners including councilman Samuel Wragg. His price was a medicine chest, valued at £300 to £400. His crew was likely sick with syphilis. Divers later pulled a urethral syringe that once held mercury, a period syphilis treatment, out of his wrecked flagship.

No hostages died. The prisoners were released after the chest arrived.

He may never have killed anyone before his final fight. Historian Colin Woodard found no eyewitness account of Blackbeard killing anyone before the battle that killed him. The scary look was the weapon. It made ships give up without a fight.

The beard was not on fire. Even the 1724 book that made him famous puts the lit matches under his hat, not in a burning beard.

The grounding may or may not have been on purpose. The *Queen Anne's Revenge* ran aground at Topsail (now Beaufort) Inlet in June 1718. One early book swears he did it on purpose to shrink the crew. Historians still argue about it.

Fourteen wives, the brimstone "hell," and the Israel Hands shooting all come from one source, a 1724 book signed "Captain Charles Johnson." Nobody knows for sure who Johnson really was. Israel Hands was a real man, though. Robert Louis Stevenson later borrowed his name for *Treasure Island*.

The hit was not exactly legal. Blackbeard had been pardoned by the governor of North Carolina. Virginia's governor, Alexander Spotswood, had no authority in North Carolina and kept the mission secret. He offered £100 for Blackbeard, compared with £40 for other pirate captains.

He died November 22, 1718, at Ocracoke Inlet. The navy counted five gunshot wounds and about twenty sword wounds. His head went to Virginia and was put on a pole at Hampton Roads as a warning.

The headless swim is pure legend.

No treasure has ever been found. His flagship was found off Beaufort Inlet on November 21, *1996*, one day short of the anniversary of his death. Divers have raised cannons, medical tools and everyday gear. No chest of gold.

His real name was probably Edward Thache, not Teach. Historian Baylus Brooks traced a respected Thache family in Spanish Town, Jamaica, and a 1706 record of an Edward Thache serving on the Royal Navy ship *Windsor*. Brooks says he cannot prove it is the same man, but other scholars find the case convincing.

Why "Dreadful"? Penny dreadfuls were cheap weekly story papers sold in Britain starting in the 1830s, for one penny a part. They were full of murderers, highwaymen, vampires and pirates, and they never let the truth slow down a good story. Neither did a lot of pirate history. That's why we read the dreadful first, and then we tell you what's BS.

Sources: Captain Charles Johnson, *A General History of the Pyrates* (1724); NCpedia; South Carolina Encyclopedia; The Charleston Museum; Queen Anne's Revenge Project (qaronline.org) and NC Department of Natural and Cultural Resources; National Park Service, Cape Hatteras National Seashore; Royal Museums Greenwich; Colin Woodard, *The Republic of Pirates*; Baylus C. Brooks, *Blackbeard Reconsidered* (NC Office of Archives and History, 2015); History.com.

Darkwater Dreadful

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