

The Great Blackbeard Comes Upon the Stage

by Frank Richard Stockton

So long as the people of the Carolinas were prosperous and able to capture and execute pirates who interfered with their trade the Atlantic sea-robbers kept away from their ports, but this prosperity did not last. Indian wars broke out, and in the course of time the colonies became very much weakened and impoverished, and then it was that the harbor of Charles Town began to be again interesting to the pirates.

About this time one of the most famous of sea-robbers was harassing the Atlantic coast of North America, and from New England to the West Indies, he was known as the great pirate Blackbeard. This man, whose real name was Thatch, was a most terrible fellow in appearance as well as action. He wore a long, heavy, black beard, which it was his fancy to separate into tails, each one tied with a colored ribbon, and often tucked behind his ears. Some of the writers of that day declared that the sight of this beard would create more terror in any port of the American seaboard than would the sudden appearance of a fiery comet. Across his brawny breast he carried a sort of a sling in which hung not less than three pairs of pistols in leathern holsters, and these, in addition to his cutlass and a knife or two in his belt, made him a most formidable-looking fellow.

Some of the fanciful recreations of Blackbeard show him to have been a person of consistent purpose. Even in his hours of rest when he was not fighting or robbing, his savage soul demanded some interesting excitement. Once he was seated at table with his mate and two or three sailors, and when the meal was over he took up a pair of pistols, and cocking them put them under the table. This peculiar action caused one of the sailors to remember very suddenly that he had something to do on deck, and he immediately disappeared. But the others looked at their captain in astonishment, wondering what he would do next. They soon found out; for crossing the pistols, still under the table, he fired them. One ball hit the mate in the leg, but the other struck no one. When asked what he meant by this strange action, he replied that if he did not shoot one of his men now and then they would forget what sort of a person he was.

At another time he invented a game; he gathered his officers and crew together and told them that they were going to play that they were living in the lower regions. Thereupon the whole party followed him down into the hold. The hatches and all the other openings were closed, and then Blackbeard began to illuminate the scene with fire and brimstone. The sulphur burned, the fumes rose, a ghastly light spread over the countenances of the desperadoes, and very soon some of them began to gasp and cough and implore the captain to let in some fresh air, but Blackbeard was bound to have a good game, and he proceeded to burn more brimstone. He laughed at the gasping fellows about him and declared that he would be just as willing to breathe the fumes of sulphur as common air. When at last he threw open the hatches, some of the men were almost dead, but their stalwart captain had not even sneezed.

In the early part of the eighteenth century Blackbeard made his headquarters in one of the inlets on the North Carolina coast, and there he ruled as absolute king, for the settlers in the vicinity seemed to be as anxious to oblige him as the captains of the merchantmen sailing along the coast were anxious to keep out of his way. On one of his voyages Blackbeard went down the coast as far as Honduras, where he took a good many prizes, and as some of the crews of the captured vessels enlisted under him he sailed north with a stronger force than ever before, having a large ship of forty guns, three smaller

vessels, and four hundred men. With this little fleet Blackbeard made for the coast of South Carolina, and anchored outside the harbor of Charles Town. He well understood the present condition of the place and was not in the least afraid that the citizens would hang him up on the shores of the bay.

Blackbeard began work without delay. Several well-laden ships—the Carolinians having no idea that pirates were waiting for them—came sailing out to sea and were immediately captured. One of these was a very important vessel, for it not only carried a valuable cargo, but a number of passengers, many of them people of note, who were on their way to England. One of these was a Mr. Wragg, who was a member of the Council of the Province. It might have been supposed that when Blackbeard took possession of this ship, he would have been satisfied with the cargo and the money which he found on board, and having no use for prominent citizens, would have let them go their way; but he was a trader as well as a plunderer, and he therefore determined that the best thing to do in this case was to put an assorted lot of highly respectable passengers upon the market and see what he could get for them. He was not at the time in need of money or provisions, but his men were very much in want of medicines, so he decided to trade off his prisoners for pills, potions, plasters, and all sorts of apothecary's supplies.

He put three of his pirates in a boat, and with them one of the passengers, a Mr. Marks, who was commissioned as Blackbeard's special agent, with orders to inform the Governor that if he did not immediately send the medicines required, amounting in value to about three hundred pounds, and if he did not allow the pirate crew of the boat to return in safety, every one of the prisoners would be hanged from the yard-arm of his ship.

The boat rowed away to the distant town, and Blackbeard waited two days for its return, and then he grew very angry, for he believed that his messengers had been taken into custody, and he came very near hanging Mr. Wragg and all his companions. But before he began to satisfy his vengeance, news came from the boat. It had been upset in the bay, and had had great trouble in getting to Charles Town, but it had arrived there at last. Blackbeard now waited a day or two longer; but as no news came from Mr. Marks, he vowed he would not be trifled with by the impudent people of Charles Town, and swore that every man, woman, and child among the prisoners should immediately prepare to be hanged.

Of course the unfortunate prisoners in the pirate ship were in a terrible state of mind during the absence of Mr. Marks. They knew very well that they could expect no mercy from Blackbeard if the errand should be unsuccessful, and they also knew that the Charles Town people would not be likely to submit to such an outrageous demand upon them; so they trembled and quaked by day and by night, and when at last they were told to get ready to be hanged, every particle of courage left them, and they proposed to Blackbeard that if he would spare their lives, and that if it should turn out that their fellow-citizens had decided to sacrifice them for the sake of a few paltry drugs, they would take up the cause of the pirates; they would show Blackbeard the best way to sail into the harbor, and they would join with him and his men in attacking the city and punishing the inhabitants for their hard-hearted treatment of their unfortunate fellow-citizens.

This proposition pleased Blackbeard immensely; it would have been like a new game to take Mr. Wragg to the town and make him fight his fellow-members of the Council of the Province, and so he rescinded his order for a general execution, and bade his prisoners prepare to join with his pirates when he should give the word for an assault upon their city.

In the meantime there was a terrible stir in Charles Town. When the Governor and citizens

received the insolent and brutal message of Blackbeard they were filled with rage as well as consternation, and if there had been any way of going out to sea to rescue their unhappy fellow-citizens, every able-bodied man in the town would have enlisted in the expedition. But they had no vessels of war, and they were not even in a position to arm any of the merchantmen in the harbor. It seemed to the Governor and his council that there was nothing for them to do but to submit to the demands of Blackbeard, for they very well knew that he was a scoundrel who would keep his word, and also that whatever they did must be done quickly, for there were the three swaggering pirates in the town, strutting about the streets as if they owned the place. If this continued much longer, it would be impossible to keep the infuriated citizens from falling upon these blustering rascals and bringing their impertinence to a summary end. If this should happen, it would be a terrible thing, for not only would Mr. Wragg and his companions be put to death, but the pirates would undoubtedly attack the town, which was in a very poor position for defence.

Consequently the drugs were collected with all possible haste, and Mr. Marks and the pirates were sent with them to Blackbeard. We do not know whether or not that bedizened cutthroat was satisfied with the way things turned out; for having had the idea of going to Charles Town and obliging the prisoners to help him confiscate the drugs and chemicals, he may have preferred this unusual proceeding to a more commonplace transaction; but as the medicine had arrived he accepted it, and having secured all possible booty and money from the ships he had captured, and had stripped his prisoners of the greater part of their clothing, he set them on shore to walk to Charles Town as well as they could. They had a miserably difficult time, making their way through the woods and marshes, for there were women and children among them who were scarcely equal to the journey. One of the children was a little boy, the son of Mr. Wragg, who afterward became a very prominent man in the colonies. He rose to such a high position, not only among his countrymen, but in the opinion of the English government, that when he died, about the beginning of the Revolution, a tablet to his memory was placed in Westminster Abbey, which is, perhaps, the first instance of such an honor being paid to an American.

Having now provided himself with medicines enough to keep his wild crew in good physical condition, no matter how much they might feast and frolic on the booty they had obtained from Charles Town, Blackbeard sailed back to his North Carolina haunts and took a long vacation, during which time he managed to put himself on very good terms with the Governor and officials of the country. He had plenty of money and was willing to spend it, and so he was allowed to do pretty much as he pleased, provided he kept his purse open and did not steal from his neighbors.

But Blackbeard became tired of playing the part of a make-believe respectable citizen, and having spent the greater part of his money, he wanted to make some more. Consequently he fitted out a small vessel, and declaring that he was going on a legitimate commercial cruise, he took out regular papers for a port in the West Indies and sailed away, as if he had been a mild-mannered New England mariner going to catch codfish. The officials of the town of Bath, from which he sailed, came down to the ship and shook hands with him and hoped he would have good success.

After a moderate absence he returned to Bath, bringing with him a large French merchant vessel, with no people on board, but loaded with a valuable cargo of sugar and other goods. This vessel he declared he had found deserted at sea, and he therefore claimed it as a legitimate prize. Knowing the character of this bloody pirate, and knowing how very improbable it was that the captain and all the crew of a valuable merchant vessel, with nothing whatever the matter with her, would go out into their boats and row away, leaving their ship to become the property of any one who might happen along, it may seem surprising that the officials of Bath appeared to have no doubt of the truth of Blackbeard's

story, and allowed him freely to land the cargo on the French ship and store it away as his own property.

But people who consort with pirates cannot be expected to have very lively consciences, and although there must have been persons in the town with intelligence enough to understand the story of pitiless murder told by that empty vessel, whose very decks and masts must have been regarded as silent witnesses that her captain and crew did not leave her of their own free will, no one in the town interfered with the thrifty Blackbeard or caused any public suspicion to fall upon the propriety of his actions.

Source:

Stockton, Frank Richard. "The Great Blackbeard Comes Upon the Stage." *Buccaneers and Pirates of Our Coasts*. New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1926. 200 – 209. Electronic.