

Chapter five – a sure thing

BlackBeard woke without his usual nagging headache. In fact, he felt calm, relaxed and well-rested, though the parrot was still snoring. He could feel a combination of gentle swaying and vicious plunging, a combination which told him that *The Black Pig* was under sail. The creak of the mainmast, the shouts of his crew and the CRASH! when the ship's prow hit the waves were something that generally made BlackBeard happy – after all, sailing meant pirating, and pirating was what BlackBeard did best. But this morning there was something else, something that normally didn't bother BlackBeard. Yesterday. Slowly, the previous evening's events unravelled in his head. Sitting up in his chair, BlackBeard lifted the empty tankard from the table to his nose and inhaled deeply.

- Milk?

He stood up, and turned to look at himself in the long mirror he'd had installed to help him make sure he was looking suitably fearsome before he went into action. He stroked his beard suspiciously.

- Am I going grey?

Then he turned sideways, and stroked his stomach.

- Am I getting fat?

This was not good. BlackBeard knew full well that a pirate relied on his reputation. Remember what he had discussed with old RedBeard? He thought that a good pirate ought always let the odd prisoner go, just so they can report on how fearsome and cruel you're being this season. After all, how many stories do you hear of shipwrecked sailors gently nudged away from the safety of the shore into the open ocean by a clicking, smirking dolphin? Exactly.

- Time for some action.

BlackBeard took a quick survey of his cabin. You might be surprised to find that it was a pretty neat and tidy cabin, even though the beams were practically dripping cutlasses and ammunition belts and pikes and pistols and, in one corner, a good selection of torture instruments. BlackBeard didn't actually use any of them – he was so fearsome they weren't necessary – he simply collected them, as a reminder of just how far ahead in the pirating game he was. But BlackBeard wasn't looking for anything like this. He needed something for his beard. Of course, you and I know he ought simply to have accepted the ravages of time, and allowed himself to age gracefully – or increasingly

disgracefully, in his case. But no, BlackBeard was BlackBeard, not Salt'N'PepperBeard, or SteakyWhiteBeard, or GreyBeard.

- Now *that's* what we're after.

His eyes had fallen onto the chart table, on which lay the captain's log, the sea charts, various instruments and the large bottle of Indian ink with which he carefully inscribed the takings from any action at sea – it was sea-salt and sea-water proof. BlackBeard may have been a dastardly, unpleasant, evil and thoroughly bad egg, but when it came to sharing out the spoils, he was scrupulously fair. That's how come he had such a good (and yes, by good I mean bad) crew.

- Right, let's see.

He poured some ink into the tankard and tried dipping his beard directly into it.

- Err, no.

That didn't exactly work, and he looked in the mirror only to see long drips of black down his favourite shirt. He turned around, took up his pen, dipped it into the ink and carefully drew the nib down a long, white hair.

- Err, No. I haven't got all day. There are merchantmen to plunder.

Then he had an idea. He reached across and grabbed one of the parrot's tail feathers, yanking it out.

- **?\$\$!! Do you mind, that HURT!

The parrot was not amused. BlackBeard, ignoring his complaints – it's not like he could simply put the feather back, was it? – dipped the fluffy end into the ink and brushed his beard with the inky tendrils.

- Hmm. Almost.

Well, not even close, as I'm sure you can imagine. Then he had another idea.

- Let me see ... take one pot of Indian ink, some of yesterday's leftover porridge, and blend together thoroughly. Apply mixture with feather in even stokes to beard, then wrap in cheesecloth for ten minutes ... and relax with a copy of Pirating Monthly.

He dared take a peek at the results in the mirror. To be fair, he looked particularly daft,

standing there in his nightcap, bed socks and a shirt with ink stains down the front, beard wrapped in muslin and smelling faintly of porridge. No, I wouldn't want be the one to tell him, either. Luckily, he decided to tell himself.

- You're losing it, my boy.

There was a shout above his head, and immediately afterwards, a loud knock at the door. No time for relaxation today.

It swung open. I know what you're thinking. Knock, and wait. Especially with someone as volatile as BlackBeard. It's not only polite, but can ensure long life and good health. But there's an unwritten code, which says (paragraph 2, subsection 4: 'sighting of potential plunder'), that as soon as a potential plundering opportunity presents itself, the captain must be informed. In person. After all, what could BlackBeard possibly be doing that might embarrass him?

- Cap'n ...

The Bo'sun stopped mid-speech. Then he fell over backwards, having been struck square in the temple by a tankard filled with a strange smelling, black goo.

- GET ... OUT!

And that was the parrot. I'm not even going to tell you what BlackBeard said. It makes me shudder even now. The door slammed shut. A hush fell over the ship. There was a whisper from the very top of the mainmast.

- (Merchantman on the starboard bow?)

The ship became a discreet hive of activity, with each pirate preparing to take up his plundering position. Pirates, naturally, are banned absolutely from indulging in any plundering without direct orders from their captain, or most senior conscious pirate available. Ships like *The Black Pig*, however, were crewed by such experienced pirates that they knew exactly how far the rules could be bent and while they wouldn't exactly launch an attack without permission, they were good enough to be able to time things so that when BlackBeard yelled out **BOARD SHIP!** they were not so much ready, but practically boarding said vessel. The important thing was not to be first onto the prey, but a very, very close second, and the trick was to ensure that the order would come when they were just on the verge of beginning their swing. They were a crew any pirate could be proud of ...

In the captain's cabin, there was another discreet whirl of activity taking place. BlackBeard knew that the longer he stayed below, the worse it would look. There were several things that could sink a captain, perhaps the most serious of which was the possibility that he had a hangover. After all, a captain needed to be able to beat all of his crew at everything, and especially consumption of rum, which meant that the earlier you could start again the next day, the better.

- Right. Let's get ready for some action.

BlackBeard hauled the cold mustard bath onto the chart table, unwrapped his beard and shoved it into the cloudy water, swishing it around while the parrot watched, beak as aghast as a beak can be. After it was thoroughly rinsed, he took a comb and combed it thoroughly.

- Oh, I wondered where that had got to.

It was a monocle he'd taken to wearing to read, which had disappeared some weeks previously. He patted his beard dry, and fluffed it up, before looking in the mirror.

- Hmm. Well, it's lovely and soft ...

It was like looking at a new beard. It was jet black once more – perhaps a little *too* black, if he were honest, though luckily, being BlackBeard, honesty had never been much of an issue – but it was the shape more than anything. No longer the vicious scimitar of a beard belonging to a pirate for whom every part of his appearance was an opportunity to intimidate his victims, but more the thick, luxuriant beard of an indulgent uncle. One of those uncles who always carries a packet of humbugs in his pocket in case of emergencies.

- Oh well. Too late to worry about it now.

He turned to the parrot.

- BOY! BOY! BOY!

Squawked the parrot. His rump was still a little sore, and he missed his tail feather, and so wasn't taking any chances. Jim rushed into the cabin. Well, to be fair, Jim rushed out from under the chair where he'd been hiding all along. Experience told him that out of a pirate's sight was generally out of mind. It was a maxim that had served him well since joining *The Black Pig*. After all, he was still alive. Something he found helped him greatly with the performance of his duties.

BlackBeard held out his arms.

- TUNIC!

Jim slipped on his tunic.

- GAITERS!

Jim slipped on his gaiters.

- BOOTS!

The boots were on. Left. Right. Done.

- BELT!

Jim put on BlackBeard's best fighting belt, and wrestled with its buckle ...

- Err, Cap'n, err ...

The parrot flew off its perch and hid behind the curtain.

- It ... doesn't ... fit.

Jim's voice was small. His chances of survival were, he thought, somewhat smaller, currently plummeting below the zero line. Then he fainted.

- OH, FOR PITY's sake ...

BlackBeard wondered why he was shouting. There was no-one left to hear. Then he took the belt out of Jim's unconscious hands, laid it on the desk and drove two new holes in it with his knife.

- There. Perfect.

He slung his sword belt over his shoulder and snatched up his hat, planting it firmly on his head. He stood in front of the mirror. Something, he thought, was missing.

- One final touch ...

A bit of this, a bit of that, and he was ready. Ready to get up on the foredeck and back to what he did best. Pirating. He flung open the cabin door, and strode onto the deck. The

hive of activity simply stopped buzzing. Even the wind seemed to drop, as did the collective jaws of *The Black Pig's* crew. They had been wondering what was taking so long, and now they knew.

- WHAT?

Thundered BlackBeard. Well. It's obvious what, thought the crew. Their evil, despicable and unpleasant captain stood before them quite resplendent in his usual pirating get-up. The great pirate boots, the tricorne hat, the cutlass, the pistols, the really rather lovely black beard (the state of his beard alone was the beginning of stories told by this crew of this day for years to come – the first thing we saw was his beard. It looked, well, it looked like Madame Ginger's hair, only without the ginger bits and the scuzz!), and the slightly strained tunic over the oddly stained shirt (BlackBeard *had* been in something of a hurry). The fact that the tunic was red was not the problem, though looking back, all of the crew now pretend that this was the real giveaway. To this day, none of them dare admit what they really saw. What really happened. Just how terrifying it was.

Instead of tying his beard and hair with tapers that could be lit just before he swung into action, he had twisted them up with little pieces of what looked like silvery, glittery string.

- ANY OF YOU DOGS READY TO PLUNDER?

And you know what? They really, really weren't. Their captain had tinsel in his beard. Things didn't look good.