

The Queen of the Caribbean

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Edited by Catherine Peck



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Chapter 1

The Black Corsair

The sea roared deafeningly, mountainous waves crashed against the docks of Puerto Limon and the shores of Nicaragua and Costa Rica as the approaching hurricane raged across the Caribbean. The air was thick with the scent of impending rains; the sun, a disk of copper red, had almost set, its waning light bursting at times through rents in the thick black clouds darkening the heavens.

Only a few fishermen and a handful of soldiers from the small Spanish garrison had dared remain on the beach, stubbornly ignoring the elements. Curiosity had kept them outdoors. A few hours earlier a ship had been spotted on the horizon and, judging by her sails, she appeared intent on sheltering in the small bay.

In those days, towards the end of the 17th century, each approaching vessel created a stir among the Spanish colonists that lived along the Gulf of Mexico, the Yucatan, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Panama and the Antilles. Their fear was spying a fleet of vessels manned by the dreaded pirates of Tortuga, a sight to sew panic among the industrious townspeople of the New World.

If an approaching ship looked suspicious, women and children rushed into their houses as men quickly took up arms. If she flew Spanish colours, she was greeted with a thunderous hurrah; if, however, she bore a different flag, terror would spread among the colonists and soldiers; even battle hardened officers would turn pale with fear.

The looting and slaughter wrought by Pierre le Grand, Bras de Ferre, John Davis, Montbars, the Black Corsair, his brothers the Red and the Green Corsairs, and by L'Ollonais had sewn fear throughout the Spanish Main, for in those times people believed that those fearless buccaneers were no less than the sons of Satan himself.

At the sight of that ship, the few townspeople that had lingered to watch the approaching storm, decided to remain a while longer to see if a friend or foe was drawing nearer to their shore. None could hide their unease.

“May the Madonna of Pilar protect us!” said an old man with bronzed skin and a long thick beard. “She isn’t one of ours, my friends. No captain would ever venture out on a night like this. Mark my words, they’re pirates.”

“Are you certain she’s headed here?” asked a sergeant, standing among a small group of soldiers.

“Absolutely, Señor Vasco. Look! She’s tacked toward Capo Blanco and pointed her bow right towards us.”

“She looks like a brik. What do you make of her, Alonzo?”

“As you say, Señor Vasco, a brik. A nice ship, by God; she’s holding her own against the waves. I’d wager she’ll drop anchor in Puerto Limon within the hour.”

“And what makes you think she isn’t one of ours?”

“A Spanish ship would have sheltered at Chiriquí; she’d be better protected there than in our bay.”

“You’re right, I suppose, but I doubt she’s a pirate ship. Why would they attack Puerto Limon? We have nothing of value here.”

“May I venture my opinion, Señor Vasco?” said a young man as he stepped forth from the group of fishermen.

“By all means, Diego.”

“That’s the *Thunder*, the Black Corsair’s ship.”

The men shuddered in terror. Even the sergeant, who had earned his stripes in battle, turned pale.

“The Black Corsair!” he exclaimed, his voice trembling slightly. “Nonsense.”

“Two days ago, while I was fishing for manatee off the islands of Chiriquí, a ship passed within a musket shot from my boat. I glimpsed her name, it was the *Thunder* and I’m certain that’s the same ship.”

“Carambal!” the sergeant exclaimed angrily. “And this is the first you speak of it!”

“I didn’t want to alarm the townspeople,” replied the young man.

“If you had warned us, we could have sent for reinforcements from San Juan.”

"Reinforcements?" the fishermen said mockingly. "What would they have done?"

"Helped us fend off those spawn of Satan," replied the sergeant.

"Hmph!" added another fisherman, who was as tall as a grenadier and as strong as a bull. "I've fought those men and I know their worth. I was in Gibraltar when L'Ollonais and the Black Corsair attacked the city. *Carrai!* What a battle! Believe me, Sergeant, they're invincible."

He turned and walked off toward the hamlet. The remaining fishermen were about to follow, when an old weather-beaten man who until then had remained silent, stayed them with a gesture. He had been scanning the waters and had just drawn his spyglass from his eye.

"There's no need to hide," he said. "The Black Corsair does not harm those that pose no threat to him."

"And what do you know of it?" asked the sergeant.

"I know the Black Corsair."

"Is that his ship?"

"Yes, that's the *Thunder*."

Fear swelled up in them once more; even the sergeant had lost his usual sangfroid and appeared rooted to the ground.

The ship continued to approach, soaring over the tempestuous seas like a large black gull. She climbed every towering swell, rising to great heights, then plunged into the troughs, vanishing for an instant only to emerge moments later in the fading evening dusk. Lightning flashed above her masts, bathing her swollen sails in pale light.

Waves attacked her from all sides, smashing against her bulwarks, and crashing down upon her deck, but she would not be deterred. Certain shelter was at hand, she headed straight for the small harbour. When at last she finally reached the tiny port, the fishermen and the soldiers exchanged nervous glances.

"They're coming ashore!" a man exclaimed. "The crew are preparing the anchors!"

"Run!" shouted the others. "Spread the word: Pirates!"

The fishermen scattered, disappearing into the tiny hamlet. The sergeant and his soldiers hesitated for a moment, then set off toward the small fort atop the cliff at the far end of the jetty that overlooked the bay.

Puerto Limon was protected by a garrison of a hundred and fifty men but with only two cannons, it could not expect to defeat a ship that was renowned for her powerful artillery. All the soldiers could do was shut themselves up in their fort and wait for the siege to begin. In the meantime, the ship, despite the furious attacks of wind and waves, had entered the harbour and dropped anchor a hundred and fifty meters from the jetty.

She was a magnificent brik, built for speed, with a narrow hull and tall masts, a true racer. Twelve cannons peered from the gun ports, six to port, six to starboard. Two large chasers were visible on her quarterdeck. A flag fluttered over her stern, a large black banner emblazoned with two gold letters, and her captain's coat of arms.

Numerous men lined her bridge, forecastle, bulwarks and quarterdeck, while several gunners, standing at the stern, pointed her two large chasers at the fort, ready to shower it with iron at the first command. The sails were clewed, two more anchors were cast then a longboat was lowered down her leeward side and put into the water. It headed immediately toward the jetty.

Fifteen men manned it, armed with muskets, pistols and short cutlasses, the favoured weapons of the pirates of Tortuga.

Despite the turbulent waters, the longboat, skillfully piloted by its helmsman, drew behind an old Spanish ship that rested at anchor by a sandbank. The ship's bulk shielding it from the waves, the longboat advanced to a small reef and sailed alongside it until it reached the jetty. Some of the pirates planted their oars in the water to hold the longboat in place, then a man at the bow stood up and leapt onto the jetty.

That reckless individual, who had dared to go ashore alone in a town that counted two thousand enemies ready to rise against him, was a tall man about thirty-five years of age. His face was pale and framed by a curled black beard; his features were handsome: an elegant nose, small lips as red as coral and dark eyes that shone with a proud fierce light. His high forehead, furrowed by a fine line, gave his face a melancholy air, yet one could tell by his aristocratic bearing, that he was a man accustomed to command.

His clothes were as sombre as his expression, for he was dressed entirely in black, but with elegance seldom seen amongst the rugged pirates of Tortuga. His cloak was of black silk trimmed with lace of the same colour; his trousers, his

boots and the thick fringed sash that held his sword were also black. His hat too was black, as was the long feather that adorned it and curved down to his shoulder.

Once ashore, he quickly scanned the houses; the windows had all been shuttered, the streets and lanes deserted. He turned toward the longboat and said, "Carmaux, Van Stiller, Moko! Come!"

Moko, a tall African with a Herculean build, armed with an axe and a pair of pistols, leaped ashore, followed by Carmaux and Van Stiller, two Europeans, both in their forties, of stocky build, with bronzed skin, and sharp features made bolder by thick beards. They were armed with muskets and cutlasses and clad in simple wool shirts and breeches cut at the knee.

"At your service, Captain," said Moko.

"Follow me."

"What about the longboat?" asked Van Stiller.

"Send it back to the ship."

"Beg pardon, Cap'n," said Carmaux, "It would be unwise for just the four of us to venture into Puerto Limon!"

"Are you afraid?" asked the captain.

"By the devil's teeth!" exclaimed Carmaux. "Of course not, sir! I was merely thinking of your safety."

"No need, my friend, we will not remain here long." He turned toward the longboat and shouted, "Return to the ship! Tell Morgan to stand ready to sail."

He watched the longboat pull away, battling the waves that roared into the small bay, then turned toward his three friends and said, "Come, we must find the duke's steward."

"A word, Cap'n?" asked Carmaux.

"Quickly."

"We don't know where he lives, sir."

"What of it? Someone will tell us."

"There's not a soul roaming about this hamlet. It looks like the townspeople fled at the sight our ship."

"There's a fort at the far end of the jetty," replied the Black Corsair. "If need be, we'll go ask the garrison."

"By the horns of Beelzebub! Ask the garrison? Just the four of us?"

"The *Thunder's* cannons will persuade them to assist us. Now load your muskets. Time is of the essence."

While his men obeyed, the Black Corsair drew in his black cloak, pulled his hat down low and unsheathed his sword.

"Follow me!"

Night had fallen and the hurricane began to intensify. The wind howled through the hamlet's narrow lanes as lightning flashed through the black storm clouds. Otherwise, all was dark. Not a light shone in the streets or from behind the mats that covered the windows. Every door had been locked and barred. The news that pirates had come ashore had spread quickly and the townspeople had rushed to barricade themselves in their homes.

The Black Corsair set off down the hamlet's main street. At times bricks and stones came hurtling down, shattering against the walls or crashing against the ground as chimneys began to crumble in the wind. The four men, however, appeared not to notice. They had gone halfway down the street, when the Corsair stopped suddenly.

"Who goes there?" he shouted.

A figure had emerged from the corner of a lane, but at the sight of those four men, had rushed behind a wagon that stood near a wall.

"An ambush?" asked Carmaux, coming to the captain's side.

"Or a spy?" replied the Corsair.

"It could be a scout, Cap'n. The villagers may be preparing to attack us."

"Bring him here."

"Leave it to me," said Moko, clutching his heavy axe.

With three quick steps he crossed the street, pushed away the wagon, grabbed the man by the collar and lifted him in the air.

"Help! They're killing me!" howled the wretch, writhing desperately.

Ignoring those cries, Moko carried him to the Corsair, and dropped him upon the ground before him.

He was a peasant, an elderly man with a large nose and a hunched back. The poor man was white with fear and trembled so strongly that it seemed he would faint at any moment.

"A hunchback!" exclaimed Van Stiller, as another flash of lightning lit up the night. "He'll bring us good luck!"

The Black Corsair placed a hand on the Spaniard's shoulder.

"Where were you going?" he asked

"I'm a poor devil who's never harmed a soul," cried the hunchback.

"I asked where you were going," said the Corsair.

"The old scoundrel was running to the fort to warn the garrison," said Carmaux.

"No, Excellency!" shouted the hunchback. "I swear!"

"Sink me!" exclaimed Carmaux. "He takes me for a governor."

"Silence!" thundered the Corsair. "Where were you going?"

"To fetch the doctor, sir," stammered the hunchback. "My wife is ill."

"If you're lying, I'll have you hung from the highest yard on my ship."

"No, sir, I swear, I—"

"Answer my questions. Do you know Don Pablo de Ribeira?"

"Yes, sir. I know him personally, sir."

"Take me to him."

"But... sir... I—"

"Take me to him!" the Corsair thundered menacingly. "Where does he live?"

"Not far from here, sir, Excellency... I—"

"Silence! If you value your life, you will take us to him. Moko, make sure he doesn't escape."

The African grabbed the Spaniard and raised him into the air, ignoring his protests.

"Where to?" he asked.

"The.... the end of the street."

The small squad set off. They advanced cautiously, halting at each intersection, afraid of falling into an ambush or being surprised by a volley of grapeshot.

Van Stiller kept his eyes trained on the shuttered and matted windows, ready to fire his pistol at the first suspicious movement; Carmaux watched the doors. When they reached the end of the lane, the hunchback turned toward the Corsair and pointed to a large brick house that was several stories high and had a small tower.

"That's it, sir," he said.

"Thank you," replied the Corsair.

He studied the house, scanned the nearby lanes for enemies lurking in the shadows, then walked to the door, raised the heavy bronze knocker and brought it down with a thunderous crash.

The sound had not yet faded when they heard the shutters open above them and a voice call down from the top floor.

“Who is it?”

“The Black Corsair; open the door or we’ll set fire to the house!” shouted the captain, his sword shining menacingly as lightning flashed above him.

“What do you want?”

“To speak to Don Pablo de Ribeira, Duke Van Guld’s steward!”

They heard a rush of footsteps from within, then cries of fear, then silence.

“Carmaux,” said the Corsair. “Do you have the explosives?”

“Yes, Cap’n.”

“Set them by the door. We’ll give them a few minutes; if they do not come, we’ll open it for them.”

He drew back to the curbstone a few paces from the door and waited, his fingers anxiously gripping the hilt of his sword.

Chapter 2

A Simple Choice

Less than a minute passed before a light shone through the shutters on the first floor and footsteps could be heard echoing in the corridor.

The Corsair remained motionless, his sword in his right hand, his pistol in his left. Carmaux and Van Stiller stood on either side of the door with their pistols drawn; Moko had raised his axe.

The hurricane seemed to double in intensity. The wind roared through the hamlet's lanes, smashing tiles to the ground and slamming shutters against the windows. Rain began to pelt down in heavy drops; as lightning streaked the heavens and thunder roared deafeningly through the clouds.

"A good night for a visit," said Carmaux. "At least the storm should keep the garrison indoors."

"Someone's coming," said Van Stiller, peering through the keyhole. "I see a light."

The Black Corsair, impatient, raised the heavy knocker and smashed it against the door, the impact echoing darkly through the corridor.

"Coming, gentlemen! Coming" a voice called nervously.

They heard the rattle of bolts and chains, then the heavy door swung open before them.

The Corsair had raised his sword, ready to strike and the two pirates had levelled their pistols.

An elderly man accompanied by two Indian servants with torches, stood before them. He was a handsome man, about sixty-two or so, with a powerful build that belied his age. He had a long white beard that came down to his chest and thick hair that fell to his shoulders. He wore a dark silk suit adorned with lace and Cordovan longboots with silver spurs, a metal worth almost less than

steel in the wealthy colonies of the Spanish Main. A sword hung from his side and tucked into his belt was a misericorde, a deadly weapon in the proper hands.

"What do you want?" asked the old man, his voice trembling noticeably.

Instead of replying the Black Corsair signalled his men to enter then closed the door behind them. The hunchback, no longer of use to them, was left outside.

"You have not answered me," said the old man.

"The Lord of Ventimiglia does not discuss his affairs in corridors," the Black Corsair replied brusquely.

"We shall sit then," replied the old man, after a moment's hesitation. "Come."

The two servants lighting the way before them, they climbed a large redwood staircase and entered an elegantly furnished drawing room adorned with old Spanish tapestries. A silver candelabrum with four candles was lit and placed on a table inlaid with silver and mother-of-pearl. The Black Corsair scanned the room; assured there were no other entrances, he turned and addressed his men.

"Moko, set the explosives by the front door then take position at the foot of the staircase; Carmaux and Van Stiller, stand guard in the corridor outside this room." Then fixing his eyes upon the old man, who had turned as pale as a sheet, added, "And now, Don Pablo de Ribeira, we may begin our discussion."

He took a chair, set it before the table and sat down, resting his sword upon his lap.

Terrified, the old man remained standing, his eyes fixed upon the formidable Corsair.

"I gather you know who I am?" he asked.

"The Chevalier Emilio of Roccanera, Lord of Valpenta and Ventimiglia," replied the old man.

"My full title; I'm flattered."

The old man smiled weakly.

"Don de Ribeira," continued the Corsair, "Do you know why I've come to Puerto Limon?"

"No, sir, but I imagine it must be a matter of grave importance. Otherwise it would be madness to take such a risk. There's a squadron patrolling these shores, Chevalier, a fleet of mighty ships from Vera Cruz."

"I am aware of that," replied the Corsair.

"And our garrison may be small, but it's still larger than your crew."

"I am aware of that as well."

"And yet you dare come ashore with only a handful of men?"

A smile spread across the Corsair's lips.

"I do not frighten easily," he replied.

"The Black Corsair is renowned for his bravery," said Don Pablo de Ribeira.
"What do you want of me, chevalier."

The Corsair remained silent for a moment.

"I've been told that you have information with regards to Honorata Van Guld," he said at last, a note of strangled anguish in his voice.

Don Ribeira did not reply, his eyes fixed grimly upon the Corsair. A moment of anxious silence filled the room, both men equally afraid to break it.

"Tell me what you know," hissed the Corsair. "Is it true that a fisherman told you he had seen a young woman in a longboat being carried off by the waves?"

"Yes," whispered the old man.

"Where did he see it?"

"Far from the coast of Venezuela."

"Where!?"

"South of Cuba, fifty or sixty miles from Cape San Antonio, in the Yucatan Channel."

"So far from Venezuela!" exclaimed the Corsair, springing to his feet. "When did he see her?"

"Two days after the pirates left Maracaibo."

"Was she still alive?"

"Yes, chevalier."

"And that wretch did not try to rescue her?"

"He spied her in the midst of a storm. His ship could not reach her."

The Corsair let out a cry then buried his head in his hands, muffled sobs rising from his chest.

"You killed her," Don de Ribeira said darkly. "That was a terrible act of vengeance, chevalier. God will punish you."

The Black Corsair looked up. The pain had vanished, a frightening light blazed in his eyes. Colour rose in his cheeks then drained just as quickly, leaving his face paler than before.

“God will punish me!” he exclaimed angrily. “I may have killed her, killed the woman I loved, but I could not do otherwise. Do you not know of the duke’s past treachery? I had three brothers, sir; one was buried on the banks of the Scheldt, the other two rest in the depths of the Caribbean. Your friend, the father of the woman I loved, killed them all!”

The old man remained silent, his eyes fixed upon the Corsair.

“He betrayed our friendship, his flag and the men under his command. And for what? A few bags of gold and a governorship in the Spanish colonies. He dishonoured his name and his house, was I not right to claim my vengeance?”

“By condemning an innocent young woman to death? What harm had she done you?”

“The night I buried the Red Corsair in the waters off Venezuela, I swore to destroy Van Guld and all those that bore his name. He had killed my family and I in turn would kill his. I swore to God and the heavens and upon my brothers’ souls. All my men bore witness. Such a vow cannot be broken! And yet the traitorous murderer still lives! My brothers still cry out for revenge, and they shall have it!”

“The dead cannot make demands—”

“You are mistaken! When the sea sparkles, the souls of the Red and Green Corsairs rise from their watery graves and fly before my *Thunder*’s bow; when the wind whistles through her rigging I hear the voice of my eldest brother, killed in Flanders.”

“Superstitious nonsense!”

“No!” exclaimed the Corsair. “My men have seen their shades as well. Tell me, where is Van Guld?”

“You search for him still?” asked Don de Ribeira. “Wasn’t his daughter’s death enough?”

“My brothers are not satisfied. The death of the woman I loved has not placated their tortured souls, they will not be at peace until I have slain their murderer.”

“The duke is far from here.”

“I’d follow him to hell if need be. Where is he?!?”

“I know not. Rumour has it he’s in Mexico.”

"Rumour has it? You, his steward, do not know where he is? I do not believe it."

"Yet, it is the truth. I do not know where he is."

"You will tell me," shouted the Corsair. "His life is mine. He escaped me in Maracaibo and Gibraltar, but I will find him, even if I have to lead my ship against the Viceroy of Mexico's entire fleet."

He fell silent for a moment, then rose from his chair and walked to a window.

"What is it?" asked Don de Ribeira.

The chevalier did not reply. He leaned toward the window and listened carefully. The storm had reached its peak. Thunder roared incessantly as the wind howled ever louder sending bricks and tiles crashing to the ground. Rain fell in torrents, lashing against the houses, the water streaming swiftly through the streets and lanes.

"Did you hear that?" asked the Corsair his rage now extinguished.

"Hear what?" the old man replied uneasily.

"My brothers; you can hear their lamentations in the wind!"

"Such sinister nonsense, chevalier!"

"No! The Red and Green Corsairs are crying out from the depths of the Caribbean, calling for your master's blood!"

The old man began to tremble slightly and looked at the Corsair with fear. He was bold, but like most men of his time, a little superstitious. The sombre pirate's conviction had begun to affect him.

"Enough, chevalier," he said, nervously. "Your words do not frighten me."

The Corsair returned to his chair, sat down, and continued as if the old man had not spoken.

"We were four brothers," he said sadly. "Few were as brave as the gentlemen of Roccanera, Valpenta and Ventimiglia and few were as loyal to the Dukes of Savoy as we were. France and Spain had gone to war over Flanders and the House of Savoy had sent its best regiments to assist Louis XIV in his campaign. Duke Van Guld, your master, cut off from the rest of the French forces, had taken refuge in a fortress by one of the mouths of the Scheldt. Our regiment was with him. Three thousand Spaniards armed with mighty artillery had laid siege to the fort, determined to take it. For fifteen days they attacked relentlessly, cannon fire ravaged the ramparts but always in vain, the Savoyard flag continued to fly

defiantly. My brothers and I valiantly defended the fort, determined to die at our cannons, rather than surrender. Until one night, a traitor, purchased by the promise of Spanish gold, opened a back gate to let the enemy in. My eldest brother, the Lord of Roccnera, was on watch that night. He sounded the alarm and with a handful of men rushed to meet them, but before the battle had even begun he fell, mortally wounded, shot twice in the chest by the traitor's bullets. That traitor was the Duke Van Guld, your master!"

"Chevalier!" exclaimed the old man.

"Silence!" the Corsair continued sombrely. "In reward for his treachery, the traitor was given a governorship in Venezuela, but the Lord of Roccnera's three brothers still lived and they swore they would not rest until they had avenged him. They fitted three vessels, set sail for these waters and became the Green, the Red, and the Black Corsairs."

"I know of them," said Don de Ribeira. "The Red and the Green fell into the duke's hands and were hanged like common criminals."

"Both times I retrieved their bodies and gave them an honourable burial in the waters of the Caribbean," said the Black Corsair. "Your master betrayed his flag and murdered my brothers. Do I not deserve my vengeance!?"

"You killed his daughter, chevalier."

"Do not speak of her again!" shouted the Corsair. "Where is he?"

"Far from here, safe from you."

"We shall see; tell me where he is."

The old man hesitated.

The Corsair raised his sword. A terrible light flashed in his eyes. A moment more and he would bury the blade in the old man's chest.

"Vera Cruz," said Don de Ribeira, aware at last that he had no option.

"Finally!" exclaimed the Corsair.

As he stepped towards the door, Carmaux rushed into the room. The pirate appeared nervous.

"We may go, Carmaux," said the Corsair. "I have learned what I needed."

"I'm afraid we can't just yet, Cap'n."

"What?"

"Spanish soldiers."

"Who could have summoned them?" asked the Corsair, giving Don de Ribeira a menacing look.

"That wretched hunchback," said Carmaux. "We were careless and it may cost us dearly, Cap'n."

"How many men?"

"I spied four men hiding in the doorway across from this house."

"Only four? They won't be much problem!" the Corsair said contemptuously.

"There may be others hiding in the lanes, waiting to ambush us," replied Carmaux.

The Corsair fell silent for a moment then turned to Don de Ribeira.

"Would your house by chance, have a secret exit?"

"Yes, chevalier," replied the old man, a light flashing in his eyes.

"You will help us escape."

"On one condition. You will give me your word that you will put an end to your quest for vengeance. Leave the duke be."

"Is that a jest, Don de Ribeira?" the Corsair asked mockingly.

"No, chevalier."

"I will never accept such a condition."

"There are a hundred and fifty soldiers in Puerto Limon."

"They do not frighten me. There are a hundred and twenty men aboard my ship, men that could destroy an entire regiment."

"Your ship isn't anchored in front of this house, chevalier."

"We'll escape all the same, my good sir."

"You don't know where the secret passage is."

"No, but you do."

"I will not tell you until you meet my terms. Promise me you will not harm Duke Van Guld."

"I see," said the Corsair. "Perhaps this will change your mind."

He drew his pistol and pointed it at the old man.

"Lead us to the secret passage or I'll kill you here and now. Choose!"