

The Mystery of
BLACKBEARD
THE PIRATE



Written and Photographed
by Carole Marsh

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by Carole Marsh

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1 A STOLEN HEAD

“His head is missing?” Mother asked with a laugh.

Michele, who was pecking out her name - Michele Hunt, age twelve - on the computer in the breakfast room, paused to listen to her mother’s strange phone call.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” her mother said, now with a serious tone in her voice. “I didn’t realize the loss of the head could mean such a terrible tragedy.”

Michele listened intently now. What in the world could Mother be talking about, she wondered.

Her brother, Michael, sneaked into the living room through the side door. Michele guessed he didn’t want Mother to see that he was soaked with soap and water from washing the car. He was a little short to be seven and had to climb all over the sudsy car to reach the top.

Tiptoeing into the breakfast room, he mouthed a “Where’s Mom?”

Yuck, Michele grimaced, even his mouth was foamy. She whispered “Shhh,” and pointed to the computer monitor for Michael to watch. She began to type slowly in the rhythmic pace Mother said would help increase her speed. She had started typing lessons as soon as school was out so she would be ready for the drama club she wanted so badly to be in next year. She thought that if she were able to type scripts, it might

help her get accepted.

She had seen a Broadway show when she went with her Mother to New York City to see a publisher. Ever since, she'd been hooked on the theater. It just seemed to offer something for everyone, no matter what your talents.

Michael leaned over Michele's shoulder and watched as she typed:

"His head is missing . . ."

He squiggled his nose and squinted his eyes like he always did when he didn't understand something but didn't want to admit it.

Mother came around the corner to the breakfast room. She stretched the phone cord and sat down on the bench across the table from them, still listening carefully to the caller.

She smiled at Michael and Michele and gave them that loving once-over Michele knew so well. She would always stare at their pale blonde hair, then look them both deep in their blue eyes and round faces, like she was looking into a mirror back in time, perhaps when she was their age.

The three of them looked so much alike it was incredible. People would always comment about it when they went anywhere together. Even their bald-headed baby pictures all looked alike. The comments always made Michele feel a little self-conscious, and Michael always scrooched up his face.

Mother shook her head slowly. "Now I'm not really sure I want the kids to come down," she said to the caller. "It may not be safe."

She handed the receiver to Michael to hang back up, then stared blankly out the window. “Bath,” she said absent-mindedly.

“Mom,” moaned Michael, slapping his arms against his sides with a squish-splat. “I can’t get much cleaner than this.”

Mother looked at him and laughed. “If the car’s as clean as you are, you’ve earned your three bucks,” she said. “But I don’t mean tub bath. I mean Bath – Bath, North Carolina.”

Sometimes Mother didn’t seem to make a lot of sense, but it was one of the things Michele loved best about her. They both loved words. But her Mother, who ran a small advertising agency and could write a perfect sentence, always talked in twists and turns.

“Do you mean *Bath* is a place?” asked Michele.

“I do – and you and Michael are going to spend about six weeks there this summer with John. I have an out of town assignment that will take me that long, but I’ll be down on weekends.”

“Oh, Mother,” Michele and Michael groaned together. “No!”

“We want to spend the summer with our friends at the pool,” Michele said.

“Yeah, and we have tickets to the summer movies,” added Michael.

“Please don’t do this to us,” Michele begged. “We’ll just die.”

“You’ll live,” she assured them. “Bath’s a pretty coastal town on the Pamlico Sound. John is staying in a nice motel on Bath Creek. He’s doing some historical research, so he can give you a real basement-to-attic tour of the historic

homes there.”

“Ugh,” pouted Michael. “Is there a pool?” he asked, sliding off of the bench and onto the floor.

Mother shook her head. “Nope, no pool.”

“A movie theater or skating rink?” Michele questioned, afraid she already knew the answer.

Mother’s hair swished negatively again. “No, sorry,” she said.

“Phooey,” Michael mumbled from under the table.

Michele knew he was really upset. She was too, but hated to show it. Her Mother had to travel a good bit for her job, and Michele knew it was difficult for her to get care for them since her Mother and Father were divorced. Mom was very particular about who she left them with, and Michele figured she must have gone to a lot of trouble to arrange for them to stay with John in Bath.

John was nice, but she sure wanted to stay home this summer. Why did it seem like things always turned out differently than you planned them? It was just like her typing. She would aim for an *a* but strike the *z*.

“Well, Bath does have one redeeming factor, if you want to call it that,” Mother said mysteriously. “Blackbeard lived there.”

Michael popped up from under the table and screwed his nose and eyes together in disbelief.

“*The* Blackbeard?” he asked.

“No Michael, the other Blackbeard,” Michele teased.

“Blackbeard, the fiercest pirate of them all,” Mother said.

Michele sighed, revealing the dismay she’d been trying to

conceal. “Well, I guess we *could* spend the summer looking for treasure.”

“Be sure and check Teach’s Hole,” Mother advised.

“I wish they would put *my* teacher in a hole,” said Michael.

“*Teach’s* Hole,” repeated Mother. “That’s where Blackbeard fought his last skull-and-crossbones battle. He lost it,” she said in a deep, late show-spooky-movie voice. “And he lost his head.”

“Is *that* the head you said was missing?” cried Michele. She blushed, realizing she’d just given away that she’d been eavesdropping.

“Big ears!” Mother said. “I guess you could say that Blackbeard the Pirate’s head *is* missing – missing from his body. But the head they’re searching so frantically for in Bath belongs to the living Blackbeard.”

She sighed and said seriously, as though again reconsidering letting them go to Bath. “They must find it soon. It may be life or death for the play.”

“What living Blackbeard? What head? What play?” Michele begged.

“They have an outdoor drama in Bath every summer,” Mother explained. “The play is about Blackbeard and pirates and Bath. They stage it in an outdoor theater by the water.”

“You mean you just sit right outside with no roof?” asked Michael.

“The sky is your roof,” Michele said, then added quickly, “But what about the head?”

“In the play, just as it happened in real life, Blackbeard is killed at Teach’s Hole off Ocracoke Island. They chop off his

head,” Mother said. “At the climax of the drama, they have a big pirate battle and end the play by holding up Blackbeard’s gruesome-looking head. It’s supposed to be very realistic and dramatic. But now the head is missing.”

“Why don’t they just make another one?” Michele asked.

“That takes time and money,” Mother said. “The play is very expensive to produce and they don’t try to make any money – just cover expenses. Opening night is in a couple of weeks. They need to recover the head, and find out who would risk the play’s success like that – and why.”

To Michele, summer in Bath was beginning to sound more mysterious, and therefore, more fun every minute.

“Tell us more about Bath,” Michele said.

“Bath is North Carolina’s oldest town, incorporated in 1705,” Mother explained. “They have restored several historic homes. The play and the homes bring needed income to the community. A lot of mysterious shenanigans won’t help the tourist business any. And, no tourist – no play!”

Suddenly, Michael grabbed his neck as though he were trying to pluck it from his shoulders. “Yiiii, ye got me head,” he moaned.

Mother laughed. “If somebody chopped off your head today, they’d get squirted with soapsuds instead of blood,” she said, taking the kitchen towel and rubbing his hair.

“Yiiii, it was me own Mother,” Michael squealed, holding his neck and letting his head flop left and right under the towel.

“But who would steal the head and jeopardize the play?” pondered Michele.

Mother laughed. "A play's the ultimate treasure, hey? I don't know who would steal a prop head," she said, looking worried. "But John promised he would keep you two, as well as Jo Dee and Brian, from playing detective until it's found and the play can begin."

"Who's Jo Dee?" Michael asked excitedly. He poked his head out from under the towel. "Who's Brian? Does he have a head?"

"John's two children will be staying with him this summer," Mother explained.

"Oh brother," groaned Michele. "I guess I'll have to babysit." That's what summer had meant for the last couple of years since Mother started working. Michele had to watch Michael several mornings or afternoons each week, and she liked for them to stay close to home. Of course it meant extra spending money, and Michele had to admit it was hard to find ways to earn money when you're only twelve.

"Brian's thirteen, so I doubt he'd appreciate you as a babysitter," Mother said.

"Super!" said Michael. "Is Jo Dee a boy too?"

"Sorry, Jo Dee is a ten-year-old girl," Mother said.

"Girls! They're taking over the world!" Michael complained. "They're everywhere, and they're all older than me. It isn't fair!"

Michele laughed. She guessed it was hard sometimes to be the youngest and the only boy in the family, especially now with Dad not around. She knew Michael missed him. Maybe that's why Mom had arranged for them to stay with John for awhile, she thought.

Mother swatted Michael's hair with the towel once more and stood up. "I'd better fix you pirates some grog and hardtack for lunch," she said and went into the kitchen.

"We'll find the head when we're in Bath," Michele whispered to Michael, hoping Mother wasn't eavesdropping.

"Phooey with Blackbeard's head," said Michael, "let's find his treasure!" He watched as Michele pecked out on the computer keyboard:

"Who has the head? Why? What will they do next?"

The phone rang and Mother answered it and came around the corner with a strange look on her face.

She thrust the receiver toward Michele as though she were eager to get rid of it. "It's for you," she said. "It's Blackbeard."

2 PHONE CALL FROM A PIRATE

Michele stared at Mother in disbelief. Then she took the receiver carefully. She'd never talked to a pirate before. "Hello?" she said, her voice quivering in suspense.

"Good morning, Miss Hunt," said a man's voice, deep and rich sounding like their minister had. "My name is Jack Denning. I'm an actor and will play the part of Ned Teach – Blackbeard – in the outdoor drama in Bath this summer."

An actor! Michele thought he sounded handsome and friendly to be a pirate. But of course, that was only in the play, she reminded herself.

"I'm at the Harbor Motel," he continued. "John was telling me about you and your planned visit to Bath, and of your interest in the theater."

"Oh yes, Mr. Blackbeard – I mean, Mr. Denning, I love the theater," she said.

"Well, I was wondering if you'd be interested in helping us out during this summer's performance?" he asked casually.

"Help?" Michele repeated in awe.

"Yes. We're lining up students your age to help with tickets, concessions, props – maybe even be an extra in one of the scenes."

Michele couldn't believe he was offering her a chance to be in, around, and maybe even on the stage.

“Of course you might have to help clean up afterwards too,” he added.

Clean up! Didn't he know that to be near the theater she would sweep the entire stage with one hand and the broom behind her back?

“And,” he added, “the pay's not much.”

Pay! They were going to let her do all this and pay her too, Michele marveled. Why, she would offer them her lifetime allowance for an opportunity like this.

Her cheeks flushed as she realized the actor had quit talking and was waiting for her to speak.

“You bet!” she wanted to shout into the telephone. She smiled mysteriously at Mother and Michael who were staring at her, puzzled. “I'll have to ask my Mother,” she said, trying to sound like that was just a simple technicality.

“Well, be sure and tell her there's a lot of adult supervision, especially since my head has disappeared,” he said with a deep laugh.

He sure did sound like a pirate, Michele thought.

“Please let me or Tom Tankard, the play manager, know your decision just as soon as you get to Bath,” he said.

“I will,” Michele assured him. “Thank you! Goodbye.”

Michele sat on the bench holding the receiver tightly in her hand, not moving.

“Was that *really* Blackbeard?” Michael asked, his hands tucked under his chin in fright. “Why didn't you let me talk to him?”

“What did he want?” Mother asked.

“He wanted me to work at the play this summer,” Michele

said. She looked pleadingly at her Mother. “He said there would be a lot of adult supervision. And John will be there. Can I please?” she begged.

Mother sat back down across the breakfast table from Michele and gave her that same loving once over. She was quiet. Then slowly and sadly she shook her head. “No dear, I’m afraid not, at least not until they solve the reason for any thievery around the theater.”

“Mother!” Michele said, “You can’t mean it – it’s my chance of a lifetime. Oh, please!”

“I know it’s an unusual opportunity,” agreed Mother. “But I’m not going to be there to keep an eye on you, you know. And I’ll worry if you’re roaming around some dark theater at midnight while somebody’s up to meanness. John has a lot of research to do and I can’t bother him by having him go around the theater until this missing head mystery is solved.”

“Oh please, Mother,” Michele repeated, but this time half-heartedly. “Will you at least think about it?” she begged.

“Of course, dear,” Mother promised, reaching over the computer and patting Michele’s hand. “If John says they’ve found the thief by the time we get to Bath, I’ll reconsider, but otherwise . . .”

“Can I be in the play too?” Michael asked. “Can I be a pirate?”

“Some pirate you’d make,” Michele said. “Blackbubble the Pest.”

Mother frowned. “You’d make a very good pirate,” she said. “Get dry and let’s see how much you’ve outgrown last summer’s clothes. John, Jo Dee, and Brian are looking for you

in Bath next week,” she added, hustling Michael upstairs.

Michele slammed the computer shut. How could Mother make her miss a chance like this, she wondered. Her dream was a career in the theater. She used to think she wanted to be a playwright. But when she had shop class in school last year, she decided she wanted to design and build sets. After taking sewing and home economics, she thought she'd rather be a costumer.

Then, after her first trip to the dinner theater in Raleigh, she felt certain she should be an actress.

Ever since, she had watched for an opportunity to try out even one theatrical job. But when they had the community children's theater last summer, she had a broken leg and couldn't participate.

Her school's new drama club was limited to 25 members. Participants for next year would be selected on “demonstrated interest and ability,” as the school called it. It was like she had heard teenagers say about job hunting. You have to have experience to get one, but you can't get experience if no one will give you a job in the first place.

Michele sighed. Sometimes she was afraid she would turn out like Aunt Mae who started to go to college to be a science teacher, but dropped out, got married and had little Sammy. The last time Michele saw her, she was washing Sammy's sister's diapers and watching those silly soap operas on tv. The only experiments she ever got to make were in the kitchen on new dinner recipes. Michele believed that if Aunt Mae had just gotten her degree first she could still have had Sammy and Sissy and been able to teach, too.

If she could just get in the drama club next year, she could try out a lot of different theater jobs and decide what she wanted to concentrate on when she went to the East Carolina University Drama School in Greenville.

As she put away her homework, Michele realized that the best chance to be in the play was for her to solve the mystery of the missing head – and solve it *fast!*

3 REAL HEADS, FAKE HEADS, NO HEADS

Bright and early on June 10th, Michael and Michele stuffed their suitcases with shorts, sneakers and swimsuits, and headed for Bath.

Not long after they left the rolling hills of Raleigh, they hit the flatter, Coastal Plain section of the state. The sky was electric blue, like looking into the deep end of a swimming pool, and the trees were as green as lime popsicles.

This was tobacco country and the little sucker plants had been set out in neat rows. Michele thought smoking was a stupid habit. She couldn't understand why people enjoyed sucking hot smoke down into their throats when you heard so much about how bad it was for your lungs. But there was not a much prettier growing crop than tobacco, especially when it topped out in the fall with its little white corsage of blossoms budding above the fat, green leaves.

Once when Mother was writing an article on the tobacco industry, Michele had gone with her to a tobacco auction in Rocky Mount. Even though she could hardly stand the smell in the hot warehouse, it was exciting to watch the parade of buyers led by the auctioneer through the mounds of brown tobacco as he gave his speedy mumble-jumble sales pitch.

Michele fiddled with her camera as they drove along. She saw a lot of sights that would make good pictures. Mother was

very quiet and Michele wondered if she was still having second thoughts about bringing them to Bath.

Michael was bugging them both by keeping a running tally of how many telephone poles, cows, and horses they passed. He also kept asking when they would stop for hamburgers and french fries, although it was only nine o'clock in the morning.

When they reached the Bath Creek Bridge, Michele begged Mother to stop and let her take a picture. The tiny town stretched out on the banks of the bay like it was posing for a postcard. Little buildings of yellow, white, and blue nestled in the green pines along the shoreline. A weathered gray pier lined with colorful bobbing sailboats jutted out into the glistening blue water.

The car bumped off the edge of the road onto the gravel shoulder. Michael hopped out as soon as they stopped and hung over the concrete rail of the bridge. "Can we swim now?" he asked excitedly.

"Get down!" Mother warned.

"I can't wait to see the rest of the town," Michele said.

"This is just about it," Mother said with a chuckle. "Except for the historic district on beyond, you can see most of Bath from here. There are only a few hundred people and the town is only one mile long and a half dozen blocks wide."

"Where's the theater?" Michele asked.

Mother pointed past the left side of the bridge to the opposite shore. "Over there where you see the mast of a boat sticking up out of the trees."

"Hey look," Michael called, motioning across the bay. At the end of the pier stood two dark-headed children waving

their arms.

“Brian and Jo Dee look eager to meet you,” Mother said.

Michele waved back. She got along well with boys. She just hoped Brian wouldn’t rub in being a year older than her and a teenager.

They drove slowly over the bridge and up to the motel. Jo Dee was jumping up and down on the porch and waving something at them.

When they got out of the car, Jo Dee’s eyes, magnified into big, brown pools behind her glasses, looked Michael over critically. Then she grinned and handed him a small card. “It’s a ticket to the opening night of the outdoor drama,” she said.

Brian scowled at Michele, “*If there’s an opening night,*” he muttered.

Michael screwed his eyes and nose together as he took the ticket. “Hey,” he said, pointing to the skull and crossbones printed on the card, “this ticket’s poison.”

“Yeah,” said Brian, “don’t eat it.”

Everyone laughed except Michael who looked like he could chew up the ticket and spit it out, and Michele, who didn’t really like the way Brian teased her brother.

Brian thrust a ticket at Michele. Well, she thought, even if she couldn’t be in the play yet, she guessed she might as well watch it. Maybe she could get some clues to solve the mystery. Of course, it was going to be difficult to get any help finding the missing head from a grumpy boy like this.

Absent-mindedly, she turned the ticket over in her hand. On the back someone had sketched a hairy head. Scrawled

underneath was: “*Where do you think it is?*”

Michele looked up at Brian in surprise and smiled. “I don’t know,” she whispered. “*Yet!*”

Suddenly from behind them, someone bellowed, “Yo ho ho!”

The door to one of the downstairs motel rooms opened. A tall, stocky, handsome man came out, smiling broadly, his arms outstretched as though to encompass them all. “Welcome to Bath!” he shouted.

Michele wasn’t sure she liked the way he hugged and kissed her Mother, but she could tell it was all right with her.

“Hello John,” Mother said, hugging him back. “I’m delivering the rest of your crew.”

“Delighted to have them aboard,” John said. “We’ll take the grand tour of Bath in a minute.”

“It’ll only take a minute too,” said Brian, waving his tanned arm toward the historic area.

“You show Michael and Michele their rooms,” John said to Brian. “And hang on tight to those tickets so we can go to the play,” he added.

As they started up the stairs to their room, Michele overheard John say to Mother, “*If they have the play. They still haven’t found the missing head.*”

Michele slowed her steps and stayed behind the others, eavesdropping again in spite of herself.

“Oh John,” Mother said, “I don’t like the sound of this. Can you keep the kids out of mischief and get all your work done too?”

“Don’t worry,” John assured her, “I’ll keep them occupied.

Whoever's 'a-pyrating' will be caught soon, I'm sure. Maybe Michele can still be in the play before the end of the season."

"Well, I don't want my kids anywhere around the theater until this mystery is all cleared up," Mother insisted.

Oh, brother, Michele thought. She sure hoped John had enough work to do to keep from watching them closely.

The others had already disappeared up the steep, narrow staircase when Michele closed the door behind her and followed them.

The motel really looked like a house from the front. It was divided into four sections. Two downstairs rooms were like apartments with a bed, table and chairs and kitchen area. Upstairs, there was a big room with a bath on each side of the hall that Mother had rented for her children.

"This is really neat," Michele said as she caught up with the others. Then she spotted the best thing of all – the view of Bath Creek stretching out into Bath Bay, the Pamlico River, and on beyond sight, the Pamlico Sound and the Graveyard of the Atlantic where so many ships had been wrecked on the dangerous sandbars in the shallow waters.

"That's Bonner's Point," explained Brian, pointing to the nearest piece of land sticking out in the water.

"It looks like a super place for a picnic," Michele noted. It was not like a beach, but grassy with trees and water around three sides.

"See that place with sand on it?" Brian asked, pointing on beyond Bonner's Point. "That's Plum Point, where Ned Teach lived when he was in Bath," Brian said.

"Blackbeard?" asked Michael.

“Blackbeard!” said Jo Dee.

“What did Ned Teach do while he was in Bath?” Michele asked. She could see Brian liked to show off his knowledge of pirates, but she was too curious to care. Besides, the sooner she got started on this mystery, the better.

“He married some local girl,” he said in disgust. “She wasn’t much older than you.”

“He was supposed to have had about fourteen wives,” Jo Dee said.

“Yuck!” said Michael, “That would be as bad as having fourteen mothers or fourteen teachers.”

Brian laughed, and Michele was relieved to see he wasn’t always so grim. Maybe he was just as unhappy as she had been at first about spending the summer away from home and friends. Of course, that was before she had a chance to be in a play.

Brian looked back out the window. “Some people say Blackbeard built a tunnel from Plum Point under the bay to Archbell Point on the other side. Governor Eden lived there and he kind of ignored Blackbeard’s pirating.”

“And sharing some of his booty was Blackbeard’s way of paying him off?” Michele asked.

Brian turned and nodded in admiration. He seemed impressed that she would figure that out.

“Tell us what Blackbeard’s head looks like,” Michael begged.

They all plopped on the soft, squashy bed as Brian described the famous orb.

“It has blackety-black stiff hair all over and a long, wiry, tangled beard,” he explained. “The eyes are black and have an evil look. And the face has smoke marks from where he would

tuck burning candles in his beard to look scary.”

“But it really isn’t Blackbeard’s head that’s missing,” Brian added. “The actor playing Blackbeard in the play had a scary costume head.”

“At the end of the play when Blackbeard gets his head cut off, another pirate is supposed to hold up the costume head like it is the real one and the audience goes *Ghhhaaa!*” Jo Dee said.

“Which head?” asked Michael.

“Blackbeard’s!” they all shouted at him, rolling on the bed and laughing at how confusing it was.

Michele sat up. “How many heads are there?”

“None right now,” Brian said. “That’s the problem. The fake head was specially-made by a costumer in Washington to look real. You can’t just go to the store and pick up a large head of Blackbeard the Pirate, you know. They’ve rush-ordered another one, but it’s going to take some time. It won’t be ready for the opening.”

“What will they do when the part of the play comes where they need the head?” Michele asked.

“In rehearsal, the pirate just points his cutlass up at the bowsprit of the ship and everyone looks up. I guess you’re supposed to use your imagination. But it sure takes away from the ending if you’ve ever seen the real head,” Brian told her.

“You said it was fake,” Michael reminded him.

They laughed. It really was confusing.

“Would you like to volunteer your head for the play?” Brian asked in a spooky voice, reaching his outstretched fingers towards Michael’s neck.

Michael jumped off the bed.

“Well, imagination is good when you’re reading,” Michele said, “but I can see where they need the real head for the play – and I think I can help them.”

“How?” asked Brian, doubtfully.

“Is there a way I can see what Blackbeard’s head looked like?” Michele asked.

“There’s a gift shop near the entrance to the theater,” Jo Dee said. “A local artist did a big picture of Blackbeard to go over the door.”

Michele scrambled off the bed. “Let’s go!” she said.

Even the short walk to the Pirate’s Treasure gift shop left them breathless. It was a hot summer day, the kind where the heavy, humid air feels like it’s holding onto you.

When they reached the shop, they fell down on the cool grass and stared up at the sign with Blackbeard’s face painted on it in black and red and yellow.

“He would surely be a frightening sight to see coming toward you,” Michele agreed.

“Especially with bandoliers full of pistols and a cutlass in his hand,” said Brian.

“And candles burning in his beard,” added Jo Dee.

“They say some pirate ships surrendered just at the sight of him,” Brian said.

“I would if I saw him,” Jo Dee agreed.

“I *did* see him,” said Michael, softly.

“When?” challenged Brian. “Where?”

“Over there,” Michael answered, and Michele knew from his quiet, matter-of-fact tone that he was *not* kidding!