

## THE ADVENTURES OF BEARCUB IRONSKULL

### CHAPTER I

#### *Where the reader becomes acquainted with Captain Bearcub Ironskull*

On Friday, September 13, 16\*\*, between seven and eight o'clock in the evening, the Tavern of the Rusty Anchor located on the harbor, almost opposite the main jetty at Port-Margot, and the usual meeting place for the freebooters and buccaneers of Tortuga Island, blazed like a furnace in the dark night, and let out, through its windows open to the sea breeze, a deafening noise of shouting, laughter, singing and broken dishes.

A considerable crowd, made up of locals, buccaneers, freebooters, *engagés*,<sup>1</sup> women, children and even old people, curiously crowded the doors and windows of the inn, without concern for the dishes, glasses and bottles which, from the inside, rained almost continuously on them.

They mixed their joyful applause with the frenetic cheerfulness of the twenty-five or thirty guests seated around a huge round table in the great hall.

It was a party that night at the Rusty Anchor, a party of buccaneers, without restrictions and limitations, where drunkenness filled all faces, put lightning in all eyes, and madness in all heads.

Captain Bearcub Ironskull, one of the most formidable buccaneers on Tortuga Island, had, that very morning, hired a crew of 473 Brothers of the Coast, chosen with particular care from the most formidable buccaneers who were then in Port-Margot, Port-de-Paix, or Leogane. And that very night, his ship, the *Trickster*, was to leave her anchorage of Port-Margot and set sail for an unknown destination.

But the captain, before his departure, had wanted to gather all his old friends for a last meal and the most famous leaders of the Brothers of the Coast, sitting at his table, toasted with unreserved enthusiasm to the success of Bearcub Ironskull's mysterious expedition.

There were gathered: Montbarts the Exterminator, Beau Laurent, Michel the Basque,<sup>2</sup> Vent-en-Panne,<sup>3</sup> Michel de Grammont,<sup>4</sup> Pitrians,<sup>5</sup> L'Olonnais, Alexandre Bras-de-Fer,<sup>6</sup> David,<sup>7</sup> Pierre Legrand,<sup>8</sup> the Poletais, Drack,<sup>9</sup> Roche Brazilliano,<sup>10</sup> and so many other Brothers of the Coast, no less illustrious and no less formidable.

M. d'Ogeron, governor on behalf of His Majesty Louis XIV, of Tortuga Island and the French portion of Santo Domingo, occupied the place of honor; at his right sat Captain Bearcub Ironskull; at

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<sup>1</sup> Also "hired hands," in reality indentured servants.

<sup>2</sup> Born Michel Etchegorria, pirate from the Kingdom of Navarre in Southwest France. He is best known as a companion of L'Olonnais, with whom he sacked Maracaibo and Gibraltar. He died in 1668.

<sup>3</sup> Fictional character, the hero of several other novels by Aimard.

<sup>4</sup> French privateer born in Paris in 1645, lost at sea in the north-east Caribbean in April 1686. His privateer career lasted from around 1670 to 1686 during which he commanded the flagship *Hardi*.

<sup>5</sup> Allegedly an English pirate; he may be fictional too, as he appeared in Aimard's *Les Bohèmes de la Mer*.

<sup>6</sup> "Iron Arm". French pirate mentioned in Exquemelin's book (see Note 22). He is best known for capturing a Spanish ship after being shipwrecked.

<sup>7</sup> Likely David Williams (*floruit* 1698–1709, last name occasionally Wallin), Welsh pirate best known for sailing under a number of more prominent pirate captains.

<sup>8</sup> Another French buccaneer supposedly active during the 17th century, also according to Exquemelin's book (see Note 22).

<sup>9</sup> Francis Drake? (c.1540-1596) considered as a pirate by the Spanish, who nicknamed him "El Draque" or "El Dragón."

<sup>10</sup> Dutch pirate born in the town of Groningen. His career lasted from 1654 until his disappearance around 1671.

his left, Pierre Legrand, a young man of twenty-five years of age, with fine and distinguished features, the second in command of the planned expedition.

As for the other buccaneers, they had sat down at random.

A swarm of hired men, poor devils, barely dressed in shorts and tattered canvas shirts, stained with fat and blood, circulated around the guests in a ghostly silence, constantly passing dishes, plates and jugs of wine, which most of the time, as a joke, the freebooters threw at their heads—after having emptied them, of course.

In the opinion of the Brothers of the Coast, who, for the most part, had made this hard apprenticeship, a hired hand was little more than a beast of burden, over which they had the right of life and death during the five long years of their slavery.

Captain Bearcub Ironskull, as he was called, for lack of knowing his real name, was at that time a man between thirty and thirty-two years of age at the most, of almost colossal size and remarkable strength.

His regular features, of uncommon beauty, were enhanced by two black eyes filled with fire. He had an unmistakable stamp of distinction about him. His energetic manner was strengthened by a long, bushy black beard, which covered the entire lower part of his face and fanned out to his chest. His gestures were sober and elegant; his gait noble; his voice, pure and harmonious.

But like most of the Brothers of the Coast, there was a secret in his life that he carefully hid. No one knew who he was, or where he came from; everything about him, down to his name, was a mystery. All that was known of his life was what had happened since his arrival on Tortuga Island.

Although very short, his story was dark and lamentable. He had, for several years, suffered excruciating pain, without a complaint ever coming out of his lips. Never had he let himself be struck down by undeserved misfortune. Unlike other buccaneers, he lived alone.

He had never wanted to bind himself intimately to anyone else, nor enter into this fraternal association called *matelotage* which made the freebooters so fearsome. In short, he was a superior man, and, as we would say today, an eccentric.

We will quote two pieces of evidence in support of what we are saying.

The first testified to an unusual boldness for the age of superstition in which he lived: he was not afraid of setting sail on a Friday 13th with a crew of 473 men.

The second was even more peculiar: wherever he went, he was constantly followed by two *venteurs*, or hounds, and two wild boars of extraordinary ferocity, who nevertheless lived together in perfect harmony and were devoted to him in every way.

At this very moment, sitting amongst his guests, he had his four inseparable companions lying at his feet, and from time to time, he would drop under the table morsels from the best pieces of food served on his plate.

Captain Bearcub Ironskull being one of the main characters of this story, we will say a few more words about what had happened to him since his arrival on Tortuga Island.

Five or six years before the time our story begins, a ship, coming from Dieppe, had arrived at Port-Margot. It was loaded with goods of all kinds required by the colonies; furthermore, it carried eighty-five *engagés*, men and women, whom the employees of the *Compagnie des Indes*<sup>11</sup> had hired in France at derisory prices, supposedly to practice their trades in the colonies, such as masons, carpenters, wheelwrights, painters, and even doctors. Olivier Œxmelin, who later became the historian of the Brothers of the Coast, had been hired as a surgeon in Paris. When he arrived in Santo Domingo, he was sold at auction and remained a slave of one of the most ferocious freebooters for three years.

According to custom, despite their protests, the poor devils we are talking about were, the day after their arrival, auctioned off as *engagés* for a period of three years to the locals and the buccaneers who presented themselves as purchasers.

One of these *engagés*, a good-looking boy of twenty-six, had sought to protest against that iniquitous act of which he was the victim, but soon realized that he had no protection to expect from the island's authorities; that his complaints excited only mocking laughter and crude jokes.

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<sup>11</sup> More accurately, the *Compagnie française des Indes occidentales* (French West Indies Company), a French trading company founded on 28 May 1664 by Jean-Baptiste Colbert and dissolved on 2 January 1674. The company received the French possessions of the Atlantic coasts of Africa and America, and was granted a monopoly on trade with America, which was to last for forty years. Its headquarters were in Le Havre.

So he had lowered his head and resigned himself, at least in appearance, and silently followed his new master, a buccaneer from Grand-Fond named Boute-Feu. Boute-Feu was an uneducated man, of brutal and nasty nature, who liked, for no good reason other than his pleasure, to beat up his new *engagés*, subject them to ill treatments, and imposing burdens on them beyond their strength, feeding them only the leftovers scorned by his dogs.

The new *engagé* had suffered everything without complaint, fought cruelty with patience, and redoubled his efforts to satisfy the ruthless master in whose hands his unfortunate fate had thrown him. But the evil buccaneer, far from being moved by such resignation, saw in this gentleness and docility only a kind of bravado, and redoubled his vexations, waiting only for an opportunity to finish this man whom nothing seemed to be able to compel to rebel.

One day, in the torrid heat, the poor devil was bending under the weight of three bull hides, still fresh, which he had been carrying on his shoulders for several hours. Boute-Feu was hurling the nastiest reproaches to him, and, carried away in anger by the obstinate silence with which the hired man reacted to his insults, he struck him on the head with a rifle butt and knocked him down bloodily at his feet.

After a moment, seeing that the *engagé* no longer showed any sign of life, Boute-Feu thought he had killed him, and, without worrying about it any longer, took the skins and went away, leaving him there.

To those who by chance asked him what had become of his hired man, he simply replied that he was *marron*. *Marron* came from the Spanish word *maroon*, meaning abandoning, casting away, and buccaneers used it to let people know that a servant or a dog had run away. So the matter remained there and there were no more questions about the *engagé*.

However, the unfortunate man was not dead; he was not even badly wounded. As soon as his master had left, he opened his eyes, got up, and, although very weak, tried to follow him.

But, being a recent arrival, the poor man was not yet accustomed to the jungles of the New World; he was completely ignorant of the way to get safely through these vast oceans of greenery. He got lost in the woods, and wandered around for a few days, without being able to find his way home or reach the seashore. If he had managed to get closer to the ocean, he would have been saved; but every step he took, on the contrary, took him further away from civilization, for which he searched in vain in the midst of these inextricable thickets.

Hunger was beginning to press him; he ate all the meat he was carrying raw, for he had nothing with which to build a fire. His position was all the more horrible because he was completely unable to find the means of supporting himself.

Only one friend had remained faithful to him in his distress: one of his master's dogs who had not wanted to abandon him and whom Boute-Feu had ended up leaving behind, with no more care about it than his hired man, whom he thought he was now rid of forever.

It was then that, pushed to the limit by despair and necessity, the resolute character, the indomitable energy of this man was revealed, a man who, wounded and deprived of all help, instead of letting himself be overcome by pain and abandoning himself to death, instead stiffened himself against adversity and bravely undertook to fight to the very end to save his life.

His days were spent in the woods, marching in every direction; he didn't know where he was going, but he always hoped to finally break through the thick walls of greenery that surrounded him on all sides and find his way back.

Finally, he managed to climb up to the top of a mountain, and from there, he could see the sea.

His courage was reborn at this sight; he hastened down to the plain; but the first smell of a wild beast that he met soon made him lose, despite himself, the direction he wanted to follow.

While walking through the woods, his dog constantly watched out for wild game and hunted for it. When they had caught something, master and beast fraternally shared the game and ate it raw.

Little by little, the man became accustomed to this diet; the raw meat seemed almost tasty to him; he finally learned to spot the game; hunting became more productive; soon he had helpers in the form of young wild dogs and wild boars that he had found, taught, and whose help soon became very useful.

For about fourteen months, the man led this extraordinary existence. He had almost lost hope of ever finding civilization again when, one morning, out of the blue, he found himself face to face with a group of French buccaneers.

At first, they were surprised and almost frightened when they saw him; it is true that his appearance was neither attractive nor even reassuring.

His hair and beard had grown to extraordinary lengths; his clothing now consisted only in a remnant of underpants and a shirt that barely covered him; his features were tanned, his physiognomy fierce; a piece of raw meat hung from his belt; three dogs and two wild boars, looking as wild as he was, followed him step by step.

However, after the first moment of surprise and hesitation had passed, he told his story, frankly and naively. Some of the buccaneers recognized him and became interested.

Immediately, they assembled in council.

After lengthy deliberations, they declared that Boute-Feu had abused the rights that the customs of the Coast gave him on his *engagés*, and that, by his continuous ill-treatment and especially his odious abandonment, he had implicitly renounced the services of the man, and broken his contract; and that, consequently, he was deprived of all further rights on him, and that the hired man was free in fact, and should be declared as such.

This resolution, taken unanimously, was immediately carried out. Bearcub—for such was the name by which our hero was merrily baptized, and which he accepted with good grace—for, in truth, he resembled a bear more than a man—was welcomed as a Brother of the Coast, and was admitted into all the privileges of buccaneers and freebooters.

The new friends of the former *engagé* did not stop there. They gave him clothes, weapons, powder, lead, and took him back with them to Port-Margot, and there, they renewed their declaration before the governor, M. d'Ogeron, and had it sanctioned by him, despite the strong opposition of Boute-Feu, who was obstinate in claiming his rights, and maintained that the man he had hired had neither been hit nor abandoned by him, but had run away out of malice, and had gone *marron* with the intention of harming him.

Unfortunately for Boute-Feu, his reputation of cruelty was so well established in Port-Margot and surrounding areas, that M. d'Ogeron, without even wanting to hear his arguments, sent him away, threatening him with an exemplary punishment if, in the future, he did not treat his *engagés* with more humanity.

The buccaneer withdrew with his head down, without daring to answer, but brewing plans of revenge in his head. Now that he was free and had the right to defend himself, his *ex-engagé* worried very little about threats from his former master.

A few days later, Bearcub embarked under the orders of Montbarts. He thus took part in several expeditions in the company of the most renowned captains, and, in a short time, not only did he acquire considerable wealth, but he also obtained, thanks to his audacity, his daring and, above all, his intelligence, a great reputation among the Brothers of the Coast.

Since he had been declared a free man, Bearcub had never alluded to the horrible sufferings he had endured during his slavery; never had the name of Boute-Feu passed his lips. If sometimes the dreaded buccaneer's name was mentioned in front of him, he always refrained from taking part in the conversation, either to blame or to praise, although he had often been asked for his opinion. Moreover, in the three years since these events had taken place, the two men had never come face to face.

This old story, especially in a country where every day brought new adventures, had been almost forgotten, and those who, at the onset, had expected a brilliant revenge from the new freebooter, began to nod skeptically, if sometimes they were told about the relentless hatred that these two men felt for one another.

Then, one evening, fate placed Boute-Feu and his former hired hand together at the Tavern of the Rusty Anchor.

Here is what happened.

Two or three days before, a freebooter ship, commanded by Michel the Basque, had returned loaded with gold and prisoners, after a month-long cruise in the Gulf of Mexico. Six Spanish galleons, surprised by the privateers, had been boarded, looted and, according to custom, burned at sea.

As soon as the ship anchored at Port-Margot, the prisoners were unloaded, and then the loot was divided up. The freebooters, with their shares of the loot, had hastened, as always, to spend it in wild orgies. These men valued gold only because of the pleasures it procured them.

Above all else, gambling was their favorite passion. They indulged in it with unspeakable rage and frenzy, risking huge sums of money on a single roll of the dice, and, more often than not, leaving the game only when they had lost all their gold, their clothes, and sometimes their very freedom.

Since the return of Michel the Basque's ship, people gambled everywhere in Port-Margot, in the streets and squares, on overturned barrels, in inns, and even in the very house of M. d'Ogeron, the governor. Quarrels arose on all sides, blood flowed in the streets; both wise and foolish men were similarly affected by this *delirium tremens* almost as terrible and as murderous as the more conventional type.

Perhaps the only one amongst all the Brothers of the Coast to escape this madness was Bearcub Ironskull; he despised gambling, which he considered a shameful passion. His friends often ridiculed him for what they called his streak of "puritanism," but he had always remained steadfast, and nothing had been able to bring him out of the reserve he had imposed on himself.

The evening we are talking about, around seven o'clock, just as the sun was beginning to set behind the blue waves of the Atlantic ocean, Captain Bearcub Ironskull, deaf to the noise of the city, was walking nonchalantly on the beach, cigar in his mouth, his head bent over his chest, his arms behind his back, followed step by step by his dogs and boars.

"What are you doing there, you wild dreamer, when the whole city is in jubilation?"

The Captain raised his head and held out his hand with a smile to his interlocutor, one of the most renowned leaders of the freebooters.

"As you can see, my dear Vent-en-Panne," he replied, "I'm walking on the beach admiring the sunset."

"Nice pleasure!" replied the freebooter laughing. "Come with me instead of staying here wandering all by yourself, like a soul in pain, on the beach."

"What do you want, dear friend, everyone takes his pleasure wherever he finds it."

"I have nothing against that, but why do you refuse to accompany me?"

"I haven't yet; however, if you don't mind, I won't go with you. You're going gambling and, as you know, I hate gambling."

"Does that stop you from watching the others gamble?"

"Not at all, but it saddens me."

"You are mad! Listen to me: it seems that there is, right now, at the Rusty Anchor, a rich buccaneer from Grand Fond or the Artibonite, I don't know exactly, who is gambling like a possessed man. It is said that he has already dried up more than half of Michel le Basque's crew..."

"What do you want me to do about it, my dear friend?" asked Bearcub, laughing. "I don't think it's possible for me to alter his luck."

"Perhaps you can."

"How so?"

"Listen, Bearcub, when I saw you just now, I had an idea: my intention is to gamble against this man; come with me, stand by my side, and since you succeed in everything you do, you will bring me good luck and I shall win!"

"You are mad!"

"No, I'm a gambler, so I'm superstitious."

"Do you really want to?"

"Please."

"Let's go then, and by the grace of God, I hope you're right," replied Bearcub, shrugging.

"Thank you," said Vent-en-Panne, shaking his friend's hand. "For God's sake," he added, happily snapping his fingers, "I'm sure to win now."

Bearcub answered only with a smile.

The two Brothers of the Coast went together to the Rusty Anchor.