

The Life, Atrocities, and Bloody Death of Black Beard

by Charles Ellms

Edward Teach was a native of Bristol, and having gone to Jamaica, frequently sailed from that port as one of the crew of a privateer during the French war. In that station he gave frequent proofs of his boldness and personal courage; but he was not entrusted with any command until Captain Benjamin Hornigold gave him the command of a prize which he had taken.

In the spring of 1717, Hornigold and Teach sailed from Providence for the continent of America, and on their way captured a small vessel with 120 barrels of flour, which they put on board their own vessel. They also seized two other vessels; from one they took some gallons of wine, and from the other, plunder to a considerable value. After cleaning upon the coast of Virginia, they made a prize of a large French Guineaman bound to Martinique, and Teach obtaining the command of her, went to the island of Providence, and surrendered to the king's clemency.

Teach now began to act an independent part. He mounted his vessel with forty guns, and named her "The Queen Anne's Revenge." Cruising near the island of St. Vincent, he took a large ship, called the Great Allan, and after having plundered her of what he deemed proper, set her on fire. A few days after, Teach encountered the Scarborough man-of-war, and engaged her for some hours; but perceiving his strength and resolution, she retired, and left Teach to pursue his depredations. His next adventure was with a sloop of ten guns, commanded by Major Bonnet, and these two men co-operated for some time: but Teach finding him unacquainted with naval affairs, gave the command of Bonnet's ship to Richards, one of his own crew, and entertained Bonnet on board his own vessel. Watering at Turniff, they discovered a sail, and Richards with the Revenge slipped her cable, and ran out to meet her. Upon seeing the black flag hoisted, the vessel struck, and came-to under the stern of Teach the commodore. This was the Adventure from Jamaica. They took the captain and his men on board the great ship, and manned his sloop for their own service.

Weighing from Turniff, where they remained during a week, and sailing to the bay, they found there a ship and four sloops. Teach hoisted his flag, and began to fire at them, upon which the captain and his men left their ship and fled to the shore. Teach burned two of these sloops, and let the other three depart.

They afterwards sailed to different places, and having taken two small vessels, anchored off the bar of Charleston for a few days. Here they captured a ship bound for England, as she was coming out of the harbor. They next seized a vessel coming out of Charleston, and two pinks coming into the same harbor, together with a brigantine with fourteen negroes. The audacity of these transactions, performed in sight of the town, struck the inhabitants with terror, as they had been lately visited by some other notorious pirates. Meanwhile, there were eight sail in the harbor, none of which durst set to sea for fear of falling into the hands of Teach. The trade of this place was totally interrupted, and the inhabitants were abandoned to despair. Their calamity was greatly augmented from this circumstance, that a long and desperate war with the natives had just terminated, when they began to be infested by these robbers.

Teach having detained all the persons taken in these ships as prisoners, they were soon in great want of medicines, and he had the audacity to demand a chest from the governor. This demand was made in a manner not less daring than insolent. Teach sent Richards, the captain of the Revenge, with

Mr. Marks, one of the prisoners, and several others, to present their request. Richards informed the governor, that unless their demand was granted, and he and his companions returned in safety, every prisoner on board the captured ships should instantly be slain, and the vessels consumed to ashes.

During the time that Mr. Marks was negotiating with the governor, Richards and his associates walked the streets at pleasure, while indignation flamed from every eye against them, as the robbers of their property, and the terror of their country. Though the affront thus offered to the Government was great and most audacious, yet, to preserve the lives of so many men, they granted their request, and sent on board a chest valued at three or four hundred pounds.

Teach, as soon as he received the medicines and his fellow pirates, pillaged the ships of gold and provisions, and then dismissed the prisoners with their vessels. From the bar of Charleston they sailed to North Carolina. Teach now began to reflect how he could best secure the spoil, along with some of the crew who were his favorites. Accordingly, under pretence of cleaning, he ran his vessel on shore, and grounded; then ordered the men in Hands' sloop to come to his assistance, which they endeavoring to do, also ran aground, and so they were both lost. Then Teach went into the tender with forty hands, and upon a sandy island, about a league from shore, where there was neither bird nor beast, nor herb for their subsistence, he left seventeen of his crew, who must inevitably have perished, had not Major Bonnet received intelligence of their miserable situation, and sent a long-boat for them. After this barbarous deed. Teach, with the remainder of his crew, went and surrendered to the governor of North Carolina, retaining all the property which had been acquired by his fleet.

The temporary suspension of the depredations of Black Beard, for so he was now called, did not proceed from a conviction of his former errors, or a determination to reform, but to prepare for future and more extensive exploits. As governors are but men, and not unfrequently by no means possessed of the most virtuous principles, the gold of Black Beard rendered him comely in the governor's eyes, and, by his influence, he obtained a legal right to the great ship called "The Queen Anne's Revenge." By order of the governor, a court of vice-admiralty was held at Bath-town, and that vessel was condemned as a lawful prize which he had taken from the Spaniards, though it was a well-known fact that she belonged to English merchants. Before he entered upon his new adventures, he married a young woman of about sixteen years of age, the governor himself attending the ceremony. It was reported that this was only his fourteenth wife, about twelve of whom were yet alive; and though this woman was young and amiable, he behaved towards her in a manner so brutal, that it was shocking to all decency and propriety, even among his abandoned crew of pirates.

In his first voyage, Black Beard directed his course to the Bermudas, and meeting with two or three English vessels, emptied them of their stores and other necessities, and allowed them to proceed. He also met with two French vessels bound for Martinique, the one light, and the other laden with sugar and cocoa: he put the men on board the latter into the former, and allowed her to depart. He brought the freighted vessel into North Carolina, where the governor and Black Beard shared the prizes. Nor did their audacity and villany stop here. Teach and some of his abandoned crew waited upon his excellency, and swore that they had seized the French ship at sea, without a soul on board; therefore a court was called, and she was condemned, the honorable governor received sixty hogsheads of sugar for his share, his secretary twenty, and the pirates the remainder. But as guilt always inspires suspicion, Teach was afraid that some one might arrive in the harbor who might detect the roguery: therefore, upon pretence that she was leaky, and might sink, and so stop up the entrance to the harbor where she lay, they obtained the governor's liberty to drag her into the river, where she was set on fire, and when burnt down to the water, her bottom was sunk, that so she might never rise in judgment against the governor and his confederates.

Black Beard now being in the province of Friendship, passed several months in the river, giving and receiving visits from the planters; while he traded with the vessels which came to that river, sometimes in the way of lawful commerce, and sometimes in his own way. When he chose to appear the honest man, he made fair purchases on equal barter; but when this did not suit his necessities, or his humor, he would rob at pleasure, and leave them to seek their redress from the governor; and the better to cover his intrigues with his excellency, he would sometimes outbrave him to his face, and administer to him a share of that contempt and insolence which he so liberally bestowed upon the rest of the inhabitants of the province.

But there are limits to human insolence and depravity. The captains of the vessels who frequented that river, and had been so often harrassed and plundered by Black Beard, secretly consulted with some of the planters what measures to pursue, in order to banish such an infamous miscreant from their coasts, and to bring him to deserved punishment. Convinced from long experience, that the governor himself, to whom it belonged, would give no redress, they represented the matter to the governor of Virginia, and entreated that an armed force might be sent from the men-of-war lying there, either to take or to destroy those pirates who infested their coast.

Upon this representation, the Governor of Virginia consulted with the captains of the two men-of-war as to the best measures to be adopted. It was resolved that the governor should hire two small vessels, which could pursue Black Beard into all his inlets and creeks; that they should be manned from the men-of-war, and the command given to Lieutenant Maynard, an experienced and resolute officer. When all was ready for his departure, the governor called an assembly, in which it was resolved to issue a proclamation, offering a great reward to any who, within a year, should take or destroy any pirate.

Upon the 17th of November, 1717, Maynard left James's river in quest of Black Beard, and on the evening of the 21st came in sight of the pirate. This expedition was fitted out with all possible expedition and secrecy, no boat being permitted to pass that might convey any intelligence, while care was taken to discover where the pirates were lurking. His excellency the governor of Bermuda, and his secretary, however, having obtained information of the intended expedition, the latter wrote a letter to Black Beard, intimating, that he had sent him four of his men, who were all he could meet within or about town, and so bade him be on his guard. These men were sent from Bath-town to the place where Black Beard lay, about the distance of twenty leagues.

The hardened and infatuated pirate, having been often deceived by false intelligence, was the less attentive to this information, nor was he convinced of its accuracy until he saw the sloops sent to apprehend him. Though he had then only twenty men on board, he prepared to give battle. Lieutenant Maynard arrived with his sloops in the evening, and anchored, as he could not venture, under cloud of night, to go into the place where Black Beard lay. The latter spent the night in drinking with the master of a trading-vessel, with the same indifference as if no danger had been near. Nay, such was the desperate wickedness of this villain, that, it is reported, during the carousals of that night, one of his men asked him, "In case any thing should happen to him during the engagement with the two sloops which were waiting to attack him in the morning, whether his wife knew where he had buried his money?" when he impiously replied, "That nobody but himself and the devil knew where it was, and the longest liver should take all."

In the morning Maynard weighed, and sent his boat to sound, which coming near the pirate, received her fire. Maynard then hoisted royal colors, and made directly towards Black Beard with

every sail and oar. In a little time the pirate ran aground, and so also did the king's vessels. Maynard lightened his vessel of the ballast and water, and made towards Black Beard. Upon this he hailed him in his own rude style, "D--n you for villains, who are you, and from whence come you?" The lieutenant answered, "You may see from our colors we are no pirates." Black Beard bade him send his boat on board, that he might see who he was. But Maynard replied, "I cannot spare my boat, but I will come on board of you as soon as I can with my sloop." Upon this Black Beard took a glass of liquor and drank to him, saying, "I'll give no quarter nor take any from you." Maynard replied, "He expected no quarter from him, nor should he give him any."

During this dialogue the pirate's ship floated, and the sloops were rowing with all expedition towards him. As she came near, the pirate fired a broadside, charged with all manner of small shot, which killed or wounded twenty men. Black Beard's ship in a little after fell broadside to the shore; one of the sloops called the Ranger, also fell astern. But Maynard finding that his own sloop had way, and would soon be on board of Teach, ordered all his men down, while himself and the man at the helm, who he commanded to lie concealed, were the only persons who remained on deck. He at the same time desired them to take their pistols, cutlasses, and swords, and be ready for action upon his call, and, for greater expedition, two ladders were placed in the hatchway. When the king's sloop boarded, the pirate's case-boxes, filled with powder, small shot, slugs, and pieces of lead and iron, with a quick-match in the mouth of them, were thrown into Maynard's sloop. Fortunately, however, the men being in the hold, they did small injury on the present occasion, though they are usually very destructive. Black Beard seeing few or no hands upon deck, cried to his men that they were all knocked on the head except three or four; "and therefore," said he, "let us jump on board, and cut to pieces those that are alive."

Upon this, during the smoke occasioned by one of these case-boxes, Black Beard, with fourteen of his men, entered, and were not perceived until the smoke was dispelled. The signal was given to Maynard's men, who rushed up in an instant. Black Beard and the lieutenant exchange shots, and the pirate was wounded; they then engaged sword in hand, until the sword of the lieutenant broke, but fortunately one of his men at that instant gave Black Beard a terrible wound in the neck and throat. The most desperate and bloody conflict ensued:--Maynard with twelve men, and Black Beard with fourteen. The sea was dyed with blood all around the vessel, and uncommon bravery was displayed upon both sides. Though the pirate was wounded by the first shot from Maynard, though he had received twenty cuts, and as many shots, he fought with desperate valor; but at length, when in the act of cocking his pistol, fell down dead. By this time eight of his men had fallen, and the rest being wounded, cried out for quarter, which was granted, as the ringleader was slain. The other sloop also attacked the men who remained in the pirate vessels, until they also cried out for quarter. And such was the desperation of Black Beard, that, having small hope of escaping, he had placed a negro with a match at the gunpowder door, to blow up the ship the moment that he should have been boarded by the king's men, in order to involve the whole in general ruin. That destructive broadside at the commencement of the action, which at first appeared so unlucky, was, however, the means of their preservation from the intended destruction.

Maynard severed the pirate's head from his body, suspended it upon his bowsprit-end, and sailed to Bath-town, to obtain medical aid for his wounded men. In the pirate sloop several letters and papers were found, which Black Beard would certainly have destroyed previous to the engagement, had he not determined to blow her up upon his being taken, which disclosed the whole villainy between the honorable governor of Bermuda and his honest secretary on the one hand, and the notorious pirate on the other, who had now suffered the just punishment of his crimes.

Scarcely was Maynard returned to Bath-town, when he boldly went and made free with the sixty hogsheads of sugar in the possession of the governor, and the twenty in that of his secretary.

After his men had been healed at Bath-town, the lieutenant proceeded to Virginia, with the head of Black Beard still suspended on his bowsprit-end, as a trophy of his victory, to the great joy of all the inhabitants. The prisoners were tried, condemned, and executed; and thus all the crew of that infernal miscreant, Black Beard, were destroyed, except two. One of these was taken out of a trading-vessel, only the day before the engagement, in which he received no less than seventy wounds, of all which he was cured. The other was Israel Hands, who was master of the *Queen Anne's Revenge*; he was taken at Bath-town, being wounded in one of Black Beard's savage humors. One night Black Beard, drinking in his cabin with Hands, the pilot, and another man, without any pretence, took a small pair of pistols, and cocked them under the table; which being perceived by the man, he went on deck, leaving the captain, Hands, and the pilot together. When his pistols were prepared, he extinguished the candle, crossed his arms, and fired at his company. The one pistol did no execution, but the other wounded Hands in the knee. Interrogated concerning the meaning of this, he answered with an imprecation, "That if he did not now and then kill one of them, they would forget who he was." Hands was eventually tried and condemned, but as he was about to be executed, a vessel arrived with a proclamation prolonging the time of his Majesty's pardon, which Hands pleading, he was saved from a violent and shameful death.

In the commonwealth of pirates, he who goes the greatest length of wickedness, is looked upon with a kind of envy amongst them, as a person of a most extraordinary gallantry; he is therefore entitled to be distinguished by some post, and, if such a one has but courage, he must certainly be a great man. The hero of whom we are writing was thoroughly accomplished in this way, and some of his frolics of wickedness were as extravagant as if he aimed at making his men believe he was a devil incarnate. Being one day at sea, and a little flushed with drink; "Come," said he, "let us make a hell of our own, and try how long we can bear it." Accordingly he, with two or three others, went down into the hold, and closing up all the hatches, filled several pots full of brimstone, and other combustible matter; they then set it on fire, and so continued till they were almost suffocated, when some of the men cried out for air; at length he opened the hatches, not a little pleased that he had held out the longest.

Those of his crew who were taken alive, told a story which may appear a little incredible. That once, upon a cruise, they found out that they had a man on board more than their crew; such a one was seen several days amongst them, sometimes below, and sometimes upon deck, yet no man in the ship could give any account who he was, or from whence he came; but that he disappeared a little before they were cast away in their great ship, and, it seems, they verily believed it was the devil.

One would think these things should have induced them to reform their lives; but being so many reprobates together, they encouraged and spirited one another up in their wickedness, to which a continual course of drinking did not a little contribute. In Black Beard's journal, which was taken, there were several memoranda of the following nature, all written with his own hand.--"Such a day, rum all out;--our company somewhat sober;--a d--d confusion amongst us!--rogues a plotting;--great talk of separation. So I looked sharp for a prize;--such a day took one, with a great deal of liquor on board; so kept the company hot, d--d hot, then all things went well again."

We shall close the narrative of this extraordinary man's life by an account of the cause why he was denominated Black Beard. He derived this name from his long black beard, which, like a frightful meteor, covered his whole face, and terrified all America more than any comet that had ever appeared. He was accustomed to twist it with ribbon in small quantities, and turn them about his ears. In time of action he wore a sling over his shoulders with three brace of pistols. He stuck lighted matches under his

hat, which appeared on both sides of his face and eyes, naturally fierce and wild, made him such a figure that the human imagination cannot form a conception of a fury more terrible and alarming; and if he had the appearance and look of a fury, his actions corresponded with that character.

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