

THE GREAT FIGHT OF CAPTAIN TEACH

by Ralph D. Paine

YES, there was Blackbeard's ship hard in the sand which had gripped her keel while she was steering to enter the Cherokee Inlet. There was no pearly vapor of swamp mist out here to shroud her from attack. The air was clear and bright, with a robust breeze which stirred a flashing surf on the shoals. Under lower sails, the two sloops watchfully crept nearer until their crews could examine the stranded brig and read the story of her plight. She stood on a slant with the decks sloped toward the enemy. This made it impossible to use her guns with any great effect.

Captain Wellsby tacked ship and kept the *King George* well away from the cay, as Joe Hawkrige advised. With an ebbing tide, it was unsafe to venture into shallower water in order to pound Blackbeard's vessel with broadsides. Lieutenant Maynard came aboard in a small boat and was quite the dandy with his brocaded coat and ruffles and velvet small-clothes. One might have thought he had engaged to dance the minuet. Colonel Stuart met him in a spick-and-span uniform of His Majesty's Foot, cross-belts pipe-clayed white as snow, boots polished until they shone. Such gentlemen were punctilious in war two hundred years ago.

"Your solid shot will not pound him much at this range, my good sir," said the lieutenant. "With his hull so badly listed toward us, you can no more than splinter the decks while his men take shelter below."

"I grant you that," regretfully replied the soldier. "And case-shot will not scatter to do him much harm. Shall I blaze away and demoralize the rascals whilst you make ready your boats?"

"Toss a few rounds into the varlets, Colonel Stuart. It may keep them from massing on deck. One boat from your ship, if it please you, with twenty picked men. I shall take twenty men from each sloop as boarders."

"Sixty in all?" queried the colonel. "Why not take a hundred?"

"They would be tumbling over one another,—too much confusion. This is not a large vessel yonder. We must have room on deck to swing and cut."

"I will have my men away in ten minutes, Lieutenant Maynard," crisply replied the blonde, raw-boned Scotsman with a finger at his hat-brim in courteous salute. He proceeded to call the men by name, strapping, sober fellows who had followed the sea amid the frequent perils of the merchant service. Jack Cockrell was the only landsman and he felt greatly honored that he should be included. Gone was his unmanly trepidation. Was he more worthy to live than these humble seamen who fought to make the ocean safer for other voyagers, who were true kinsmen of the Elizabethan heroes of blue water? He tarried a moment to wring Joe Hawkrige's hand in farewell and to tell him:

"If I have ill luck in this adventure, old comrade,—do you mind presenting my best compliments, and—and a fond farewell to Mistress Dorothy Stuart?"

"Strike me, Jack, stow that or you'll have me blubberin'," said Joe. "Bring me a lock of Cap'n Teach's whiskers as a token for my lass in Fayal if ever I clap eyes on her again. And you'd best take this heavy cutlass which I whetted a-purpose for ye. 'Twill split a pirate like slicin' an apple."

With this useful gift in his hand, Master Cockrell swung himself into the boat where Colonel Stuart stood in the stern-sheets. Perhaps he, too, was dwelling on a fair maid named Dorothy who might be left fatherless before the sun climbed an hour higher. The sloops were moving nearer the cay under sail and oar, trailing their crowded boats behind them. Blackbeard had hauled two or three of his guns into such positions that he could open fire but the sloops crawled doggedly into the shoal water and so

screened their boats until these were ready to cast off for the final dash.

It was a rare sea picture, the stranded brig with canvas loose on the yards and ropes streaming, her listed decks a-swarm with pirates in outlandish, vari-colored garb, the surf playing about her in a bright dazzle and the gulls screaming overhead. The broad, squat figure of Blackbeard himself was never more conspicuous. He no longer strutted the quarter-deck but was all over the ship, menacing his men with his pistols, shifting them in groups for defense, shouldering bags of munitions, or heaping up the grenades and stink-pots to be lighted and thrown into the attacking boats.

It was his humor to adorn himself more elaborately than usual. Under his broad hat with the great feather in it he had stuck lengths of tow matches which were all sputtering and burning so that he ran to and fro in a cloud of sparks and smoke like that Evil One whom he professed to admire. He realized, no doubt, that this was likely to be his last stand. The inferno which he was so fond of counterfeiting, fairly yawned at his feet.

And now the sloops let go their anchors while from astern of them appeared the three boats of the assailants. They steered wide of each other to seek different parts of the pirate brig and so divide Blackbeard's force. The boats of Colonel Stuart and Lieutenant Maynard were racing for the honor of first place alongside. Blackbeard trained two guns on them, filled with grape and chain-shot, and one boat was shattered but it swam long enough for the cheering men to pull it to the brig and toss their grapples to the rail which was inclined quite close to the water. They were in the surf which broke against the ship, but this was a mere trifle.

Most of them went up the side like cats, leaping for the chains and dead-eyes, slashing at the nettings, swinging by a rope's end, or digging their toes in a crack of a gun-port. Forward they were pouring over the bowsprit, vaulting like acrobats from the anchor stocks, or swarming up the stays. It seemed beyond belief that they could gain footing on the decks with Blackbeard's demons stabbing and hacking and shooting at them, but in such manner as this was many a great sea fight won in the brave days of old.

Lieutenant Maynard gained his lodgment in the bows amid a swirl of pirates who tried to pen him in front of the forecastle house. But his tars of the Royal Navy were accustomed to close quarters and they straightway made room for themselves. Chest to chest and hand to hand they hewed their way toward the waist of the ship where Colonel Stuart raged like the braw, bonny Highlander that he was. Almost at the same time, the third boat had made fast under the jutting stern gallery and its twenty men were piling in through the cabin windows like so many human projectiles.

In the *King George* brigantine, Captain Jonathan Wellsby fidgeted and gnawed his lip, with a telescope at his eye, while he watched the conflict in which he could scarce distinguish friend from foe. He could see Blackbeard charge aft to rally his men and then whirl back to lunge into the mêlée where towered Colonel Stuart's tall figure. The powder smoke from pistols and muskets drifted in a thin blue haze. Joe Hawkridge was fairly shaking with nervousness as he said to the skipper:

"There'll be no clearing the decks 'less they down that monster of a Cap'n Teach. And he has more lives than a cat. See you my dear crony, Master Jack?"

"No, I cannot make him out in that mad turmoil," replied Captain Wellsby. "Nip and tuck, I call it, Joe."

This was the opinion forced upon Lieutenant Maynard as he saw the engagement resolve itself into a series of bloody whirlpools, his seamen and the pirates intermingled. He won his way past the forecastle into the wider spaces of the deck, with only a few of his twenty tars on their feet. Colonel Stuart was hard pressed and the boarders who had come over the stern had as much as they could do to hold their own. Thus far the issue was indecisive.

Jack Cockrell had kept close to the colonel, and felt amazement that he was still alive. His cheek was

laid open, a bullet had torn his thigh, and a powder burn streaked his neck, but he felt these hurts not at all. It was a nightmare from which there seemed no escape. He saw Blackbeard rush at him with a raucous shout of:

"The scurvy young cockerel! He will ne'er crow again."

Colonel Stuart sprang between them, blades clashed, and they were swept apart in another wave of jostling combat. A moment later the colonel slipped and fell as a coal-black negro chopped at him with a broken cutlass. Jack Cockrell flew at him and they wrestled until a hip-lock threw the negro to the deck, where the colonel made him one pirate less.

Formidable as these outlaws were, they lacked the stern cohesion which had been drilled into the sailors of the Royal Navy and likewise learned in the hard school of the merchant service. Very slowly the odds were shifting against Blackbeard's crew. It was unmistakable when Lieutenant Maynard cut his way through to join Colonel Stuart, while the third group of boarders was advancing little by little from the after quarter. This meant that the force was gradually uniting in spite of the furious efforts to scatter it.

And now there came an episode which lives in history two centuries after that scene of carnage on the decks of the stranded brig. It has preserved the name of a humble lieutenant of the Royal Navy and saved it from the oblivion which is the common lot of most brave men who do and dare when duty beckons.

Blackbeard was bleeding from a dozen wounds and yet his activity was unabated. He was like a grizzly bear at bay. His men began to believe that his league with Satan, of which he obscenely boasted, had made him invulnerable. He was all that he had proclaimed himself to be, the wickedest and most fearsome pirate of the Western Ocean. And all the while, the slender, boyish Lieutenant Maynard, sailor and gentleman, had one aim in mind, and that was to slay Captain Edward Teach with his own hand. Nor was he at all content until he had cleared a path to where the hairy pirate was playing havoc with his broadsword.

With a loud laugh in mockery, Blackbeard snatched a loaded pistol from one of his men and fired at this foppish young officer who presumed to single him out. The ball chipped Maynard's ear and he dodged the pistol which was hurled at his head. It was curious to note a lull in the general engagement, a little interval of suspense while men regained their breath or tried to staunch their wounds. They were unconsciously awaiting the verdict of this duel between their leaders. Jack Cockrell, for instance, finding himself alone by some chance, leaned against a stanchion and heard his own blood drip—drip—on the deck.

It was a fleeting respite. Blackbeard swung his sword, with the might of those wide shoulders behind it. The lieutenant stepped aside like lightning and the bright weapon whistled past his arm. Then they went at each other like blacksmiths, sparks flying as steel bit steel. Dexterity and a cool wit were a match for the pirate's untamable strength. Gory, snarling, Blackbeard shortened his stroke to use the point. The lieutenant dropped to one knee, thrust upward, and found a vital spot.

Blackbeard stood staring at him with wonder in his eyes. Then those thick, bowed legs gave way and he toppled like a tree uprooted. He passed out quietly enough, with no more cursing, and in this last moment of sensibility his thoughts appeared to wander far to his youth as a brisk merchant seaman out of Bristol port, for he was heard to mutter, with a long sigh:

"A pretty babe as ever was, Mollie, and the mortal image of its mother."

To his waist the sable beard covered him like a pall and one corded arm was flung across his breast and it showed the design of the skull and cross-bones pricked in India ink. Then as if the dead leader had

issued the command, the surviving pirates began to fling down their weapons and loudly cry for quarter. They need not have felt ashamed of the resistance they had made up to this time, but now the delirium of combat had slackened and Blackbeard was no more. One or two of his officers were alive and they knew that the game was lost. Reinforcements could be sent from the sloops and the brigantine as soon as they were signaled for. And there was no flight from a stranded ship. Blackbeard had been able to infuse them with his own madness. Better chance the gallows than no quarter.

Here and there a few of the most desperate dogs of the Spanish Main who had followed Blackbeard's fortunes a long time, refused to surrender but they were either shot down or overpowered. Captain Wellsby was sending off two boats from the *King George* with his surgeon, and the sloops were kedging in closer to the cay with the rising tide. Half the seamen were beyond aid and of the pirates no more than twenty were alive. Jack Cockrell was thankful to have come off so lightly, and he consoled himself with the notion that a scar across his cheek would be a manly memento. Colonel Stuart had been several times wounded but 'tis hard killing a Highlander.

It was Lieutenant Maynard's duty to offer public proof that he had slain none other than the infamous Blackbeard, wherefore he made no protest when his armorer hacked off the head of the dead pirate. There was no feeling of chivalry due a fallen foe, valiant though his end had been. This horrid trophy was tied at the end of a sloop's bowsprit, to be displayed for the gratification of all honest sailormen who might behold it in port. It was not a gentle age on blue water and Captain Edward Teach had been the death of many helpless people during his wicked career.

Lieutenant Maynard announced that he would take the two sloops into Bath Town, before proceeding to Virginia, as they were overcrowded vessels and the survivors of the boarding party needed proper care ashore. It would also afford the unscrupulous Governor Eden of North Carolina an opportunity to see his friend, Captain Teach, as a pirate who would divide no more plundered merchandise with him.

The brigantine *King George* was ready to escort them into Pamlico Sound, after which she would sail for Charles Town. Before the departure from the entrance of Cherokee Inlet, the stranded vessel was set afire and blazed grandly as the funeral pyre of Blackbeard's stout lads who would go no more a-roving.

Never was a nurse more devoted than Joe Hawkridge when his comrade was mercifully restored to him. Jack was woefully pale and weak but in blithe spirits and thankful to have seen the last of Blackbeard.

"Hulled in the leg and a damaged figger-head," said Joe, as he sat on the edge of the hero's bunk. "Triflin', I call it, when I expected to see you come aboard feet first wrapped in a bit o' canvas."

"I don't want to talk about it, Joe. Let's find something pleasant. Ho for Charles Town, and the green trees and a bench in the shade."

"And a tidy little vessel after a while, you and me and the Councilor a-pleasurin' up the coast with men and gear to fish up the treasure chest."

"And you believe that Blackbeard never got back to the Inlet to save the treasure for himself?" asked Jack.

"Not the way his ship was headed when she struck the shoal."

The brigantine was well on her way to Charles Town when Captain Wellsby found that Master Cockrell could be carried into the comfortable main cabin to rest on a cushioned settle for an hour or two at a time. It was during one of these visits, when Joe Hawkridge was present, that the skipper remembered to say:

"Here is a bit of memorandum which may entertain you lads. Lieutenant Maynard had Blackbeard's

quarters searched before the brig was burned. Some valuable stuff was found, but nothing what you'd call a pirate's treasure."

The lads looked at each other but kept their own counsel and Captain Wellsby went on to explain:

"There was a private log, Blackbeard's own journal, with a few entries in it, and most of the leaves torn out. I made a copy of what could be read, for the late Captain Teach was a better pirate than scrivener. Here, Jack, you are the scholar."

Jack read aloud this extract, which was about what might have been expected:

"Such a day! Rum all out,—our company somewhat sober. A confusion amongst us,—rogues a-plotting—great talk of separation. So I looked sharp for a prize. Took one, with a great deal of liquor on board, so kept the company hot, very hot. Then all things went well again."

"That sounds familiar enough to me," was Joe Hawkrige's comment. "And the rest of his writing will be much like it."

"Not so fast," exclaimed Captain Wellsby. "Scan the next page, Jack. 'Twill fetch you up all standing. Not that it puts gold in our pockets, for we know not where to search, but I swear it will make your eyes sparkle and your mouth water."

Trying to hide his excitement, Jack saw a kind of rough inventory, and it ran like this:

"Where I Hid Itt This Cruse:

1 Bag 54 Silver Barrs.

1 Bag 79 Barrs & Peaces of Silver.

1 Bag Coyned Gold.

1 Bag Dust Gold.

2 Bags Gold Barrs.

1 Bag Silver Rings & Sundry Precious Stones.

3 Bags Unpolysht Stones.

1 Silver Box set with Diamonds.

4 Golden Lockets.

Also 1 Silver Porringer—2 Gold Boxons—7 Green Stones—Rubies Great & Small

67—P'cl Peaces of Eight & Dollars—Also 1 Bag Lump Silver—a Small Chain—a corral Necklace—1 Bag English Crowns."

Captain Jonathan Wellsby listened to this luscious recital with an air of mild amusement. He was of a temper too stolid and sensible to waste his time on random treasure hunting. Blackbeard might have chosen his hiding-place anywhere along hundreds of leagues of coast. He could understand the agitation of these two adventurous lads to whom this memorandum was like a magic spell. Of such was the spirit of youth.

"Any more of it?" demanded Joe Hawkrige.

"The next page was ripped out of the journal," answered the skipper. "What cruise did he mean? If it was this last one, he may have hid it on the Virginia or Carolina coast."

Master Cockrell gave it as an excuse that he had sat up long enough and would return to his bunk. He was fairly bursting for a conference with Joe, and as soon as they were alone he exclaimed:

"It may be the sea-chest! What do you think?"

"A handsome clue, I call it, something to warm the cockles of your heart," grinned the sea urchin. "Aye, Jack, I should wager he wrote that down whilst he lay at anchor in Cherokee Inlet."

"It seems shabby of us to keep the secret from Captain Wellsby, but there is an obligation on us——"

"To Bill Saxby and the old sea wolf," said Joe. "We'll not forget this trump of a skipper when it comes to splittin' up the treasure."

"I am anxious for Captain Bonnet and his crew," remarked Jack. "With this crusade against pirates afoot, our friends may be hanged before we see them again."

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