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**Pirates own book, or authentic narratives of the lives,  
exploits, and executions of the most celebrated sea  
robbers**

**ELLS, CHARLES**

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The Life of Captain Roberts.

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THE LIFE OF  
CAPTAIN ROBERTS

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BARTHOLOMEW ROBERTS was trained to a sea-faring life. Among other voyages which he made during the time that he lawfully procured his maintenance, he sailed for the Guinea coast, in November, 1719, where he was taken by the pirate Davis. He was at first very averse to that mode of life, and would certainly have deserted, had an opportunity occurred. It happened to him, however, as to many upon another element, that preferment calmed his conscience, and reconciled him to that which he formerly hated.

Davis having fallen in the manner related, those who had assumed the title of Lords assembled to deliberate concerning the choice of a new commander. There were several candidates, who, by their services, had risen to eminence among their brethren, and each of them thought themselves qualified to bear rule. One addressed the assembled lords, saying, "that the good of the whole, and the maintenance of order, demanded a head, but that the proper authority was deposited in the community at large; so that if one should be elected who did not act and govern for the general good, he could be deposed, and another be substituted in his place."

"We are the original," said he, "of this claim, and should a captain be so saucy as to exceed prescription at any time, why, down with him! It will be a caution, after he is dead, to his successors, to what fatal results any undue assumption may lead; however, it is my advice, while we are sober, to pitch upon a man of courage, and one skilled in navigation,—one who, by his prudence and bravery, seems best able to defend this commonwealth, and ward us from the dangers and tempests of an unstable element, and the fatal consequences of anarchy; and such a one I take Roberts to be: a fellow in all respects worthy of your esteem and favor."

This speech was applauded by all but Lord Simpson, who had himself strong expectations of obtaining the highest command. He at last, in a surly tone, said, he did not regard whom they chose as a commander, provided he was not a papist, for he had conceived a mortal hatred to papists, because his father had been a sufferer in Monmouth's rebellion.

Thus, though Roberts had only been a few weeks among them, his election was confirmed by the Lords and Commons. He, with the best face he could, accepted of the dignity, saying, "that since he had dipped his hands in muddy water, and must be a pirate, it was better being a commander than a private man."

The governor being settled, and other officers chosen in the room of those who had fallen with Davis, it was resolved not to leave this place without revenging his death. Accordingly, thirty men, under the command of one Kennedy, a bold and profligate fellow, landed, and under cover of the fire of the ship, ascended the hill upon which the fort stood. They were no sooner discovered by the Portuguese, than they abandoned the fort, and took shelter in the town. The pirates then entered without opposition, set fire to the fort, and tumbled the guns into the sea.

Not satisfied with this injury, some proposed to land and set the town in flames. Roberts, however, reminded them of the great danger to which this would inevitably expose them; that there was a thick wood at the back of the town, where the inhabitants could hide themselves, and that, when their all was at stake, they would make a bolder resistance: and that the burning or destroying of a few houses, would be a small return for their labor, and the loss that they might sustain. This prudent advice had the desired effect, and they contented themselves with lightening the French vessel, and battering down several houses of the town, to show their high displeasure.

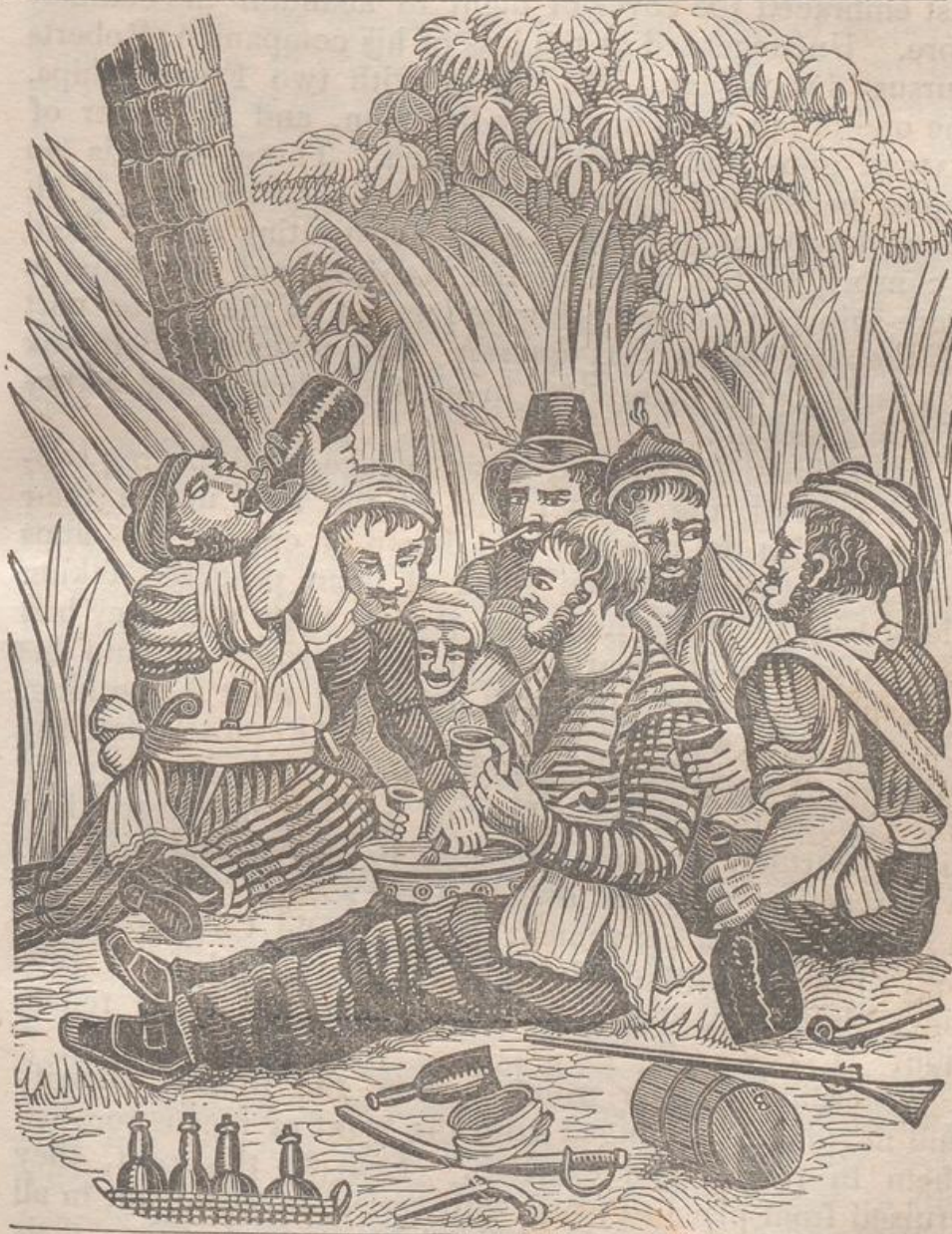
Roberts sailed southward, captured a Dutch Guineaman, and, having emptied her of everything they thought proper, returned her to the commander. Two days after, he captured an English ship, and, as the men joined in pirating, emptied and burned the vessel, and then sailed for St. Thomas. Meeting with no prize, he sailed for Anamaboa,

and there watered and repaired. Having again put to sea, a vote was taken whether they should sail for the East Indies or for Brazil. The latter place was decided upon, and they arrived there in twenty-eight days.

Upon this coast our rovers cruised for about nine weeks, keeping generally out of sight of land, but without seeing a sail; which discouraged them so, that they determined to leave the station, and steer for the West Indies; and, in order thereto, they stood in to make the land for the taking of their departure, by which means they fell in, unexpectedly, with a fleet of forty-two sail of Portuguese ships, off the Bay of Los Todos Santos, with all their lading in for Lisbon; several of them of good force, who lay there waiting for two men of war of seventy guns each for their convoy. However, Roberts thought it should go hard with him but he would make up his market among them, and thereupon he mixed with the fleet, and kept his men concealed till proper resolutions could be formed; that done, they came close up to one of the deepest, and ordered her to send the master on board quietly, threatening to give them no quarter, if any resistance or signal of distress was made. The Portuguese, being surprised at these threats, and the sudden flourish of cutlasses from the pirates, submitted without a word, and the captain came on board. Roberts saluted him in a friendly manner, telling him, that they were gentlemen of fortune, and that their business with him was only to be informed which was the richest ship in that fleet; and if he directed them right, he should be restored to his ship without molestation, otherwise he must expect instant death.

He then pointed to a vessel of forty guns, and a hundred and fifty men; and though her strength was greatly superior to Roberts', yet he made towards her, taking the master of the captured vessel along with him. Coming alongside of her, Roberts ordered the prisoner to ask, "How Seignior Captain did?" and to invite him on board, as he had a matter of importance to impart to him. He was answered, "That he would wait upon him presently." Roberts, however, observing more than ordinary bustle on board, at once concluded they were discovered, and pouring a broadside into her, they immediately boarded, grappled, and took

without taking leave of their friends. But a despatch being sent after them, they were brought back, and in a formal manner tried and sentenced, but one of them was saved by the humorous interference of one of the judges,



*Captain Roberts' Crew carousing at Old Calabar River.*

whose speech was truly worthy of a pirate — while the other two suffered the punishment of death.

When necessity again compelled them, they renewed their cruising; and, dissatisfied with capturing vessels which only afforded them a temporary supply, directed their course to the Guinea coast to forage for gold. Intoxication rendered them unruly, and the brigantine at last embraced the cover of night to abandon the commodore. Unconcerned at the loss of his companion, Roberts pursued his voyage. He fell in with two French ships, the one of ten guns and sixty-five men, and the other of sixteen guns and seventy-five men. These dastards no sooner beheld the black flag than they surrendered. With these they went to Sierra Leone, constituting one of them a consort, by the name of the *Ranger*, and the other a store-ship. This port being frequented by the greater part of the traders to that quarter, they remained here six weeks, enjoying themselves in all the splendor and luxury of a piratical life.

After this they renewed their voyage, and having captured a vessel, the greater part of the men united their fortunes with the pirates. On board of one of the ships was a clergyman, whom some of them proposed taking along with them, for no other reason than that they had not a chaplain on board. They endeavored to gain his consent, and assured him that he should want for nothing, and his only work would be, to make punch and say prayers. Depraved, however, as these men were, they did not choose to constrain him to go, but displayed their civility further, by permitting him to carry along with him whatever he called his own. After several cruises, they now went into a convenient harbor at Old Calabar, where they cleaned, refitted, divided their booty, and for a considerable time caroused, to banish care and sober reflection.

According to their usual custom, the time of festivity and mirth was prolonged until the want of means recalled them to reason and exertion. Leaving this port, they cruised from place to place with varied success; but in all their captures, either burning, sinking, or devoting their prizes to their own use, according to the whim of the moment. The *Swallow* and another man-of-war being sent out expressly to pursue and take Roberts and his fleet,

he had frequent and certain intelligence of their destination; but having so often escaped their vigilance, he became rather too secure and fearless. It happened, however, that while he lay off Cape Lopez, the Swallow had information of his being in that place, and made towards him. Upon the appearance of a sail, one of Roberts' ships was sent to chase and take her. The pilot of the Swallow seeing her coming, manœuvred his vessel so well, that though he fled at her approach, in order to draw her out of the reach of her associates, yet he at his own time allowed her to overtake the man-of-war.

Upon her coming up to the Swallow, the pirate hoisted the black flag, and fired upon her; but how greatly were her crew astonished, when they saw that they had to contend with a man-of-war, and seeing that all resistance was vain, they cried out for quarter, which was granted, and they were made prisoners, having ten men killed and twenty wounded, without the loss or hurt of one of the king's men.

On the 10th, in the morning, the man-of-war bore away to round the cape. Roberts' crew, discerning their masts over the land, went down into the cabin to acquaint him of it, he being then at breakfast with his new guest, captain Hill, on a savoury dish of salmagundy and some of his own beer. He took no notice of it, and his men almost as little, some saying she was a Portuguese ship, others a French slave ship, but the major part swore it was the French Ranger returning; and they were merrily debating for some time on the manner of reception, whether they should salute her or not; but as the Swallow approached nearer, things appeared plainer; and though they who showed any apprehension of danger were stigmatized with the name of cowards, yet some of them, now undeceived, declared it to Roberts, especially one Armstrong, who had deserted from that ship, and knew her well. These Roberts swore at as cowards, who meant to dishearten the men, asking them, if it were so, whether they were afraid to fight or not? In short, he hardly refrained from blows. What his own apprehensions were, till she hauled up her ports and hoisted her proper colors, is uncertain; but then, being perfectly convinced, he slipped

his cable, got under sail, ordered his men to arms without any show of timidity, dropping a first-rate oath, that it was a bite, but at the same time resolved, like a gallant rogue, to get clear or die.

There was one Armstrong, as was just mentioned, a deserter from the *Swallow*, of whom they enquired concerning the trim and sailing of that ship; he told them she sailed best upon the wind, and therefore, if they designed to leave her, they should go before it.

The danger was imminent, and the time very short, to consult about means to extricate himself; his resolution in this strait was as follows: to pass close to the *Swallow* with all their sails, and receive her broadside before they returned a shot; if disabled by this, or if they could not depend on sailing, then to run on shore at the point, and every one to shift for himself among the negroes; or failing in these, to board, and blow up together, for he saw that the greatest part of his men were drunk, passively courageous, and unfit for service.

Roberts, himself, made a gallant figure at the time of the engagement, being dressed in a rich crimson damask waistcoat and breeches, a red feather in his hat, a gold chain round his neck, with a diamond cross hanging to it, a sword in his hand, and two pair of pistols hanging at the end of a silk sling flung over his shoulders, according to the custom of the pirates. He is said to have given his orders with boldness and spirit. Coming, according to what he had purposed, close to the man-of-war, he received her fire, and then hoisted his black flag and returned it, shooting away from her with all the sail he could pack; and had he taken Armstrong's advice to have gone before the wind, he had probably escaped; but keeping his tacks down, either by the wind's shifting, or ill steerage, or both, he was taken aback with his sails, and the *Swallow* came a second time very nigh to him. He had now, perhaps, finished the fight very desperately, if death, who took a swift passage in a grape shot, had not interposed, and struck him directly on the throat. He settled himself on the tackles of a gun; which one Stephenson, from the helm, observing, ran to his assistance, and not perceiving him wounded, swore at him, and bade him stand up and



fight like a man ; but when he found his mistake, and that his captain was certainly dead, he burst into tears, and wished the next shot might be his portion. They presently threw him overboard, with his arms and ornaments on, according to his repeated request in his life-time.

This extraordinary man and daring pirate was tall, of a dark complexion, about 40 years of age, and born in Pembroke-shire. His parents were honest and respectable, and his natural activity, courage, and invention, were superior to his education. At a very early period, he, in drinking, would imprecate vengeance upon "the head of him who ever lived to wear a halter." He went willingly into the pirate service, and served three years as a second man. It was not for want of employment, but from a roving, wild, and boisterous turn of mind. It was his usual declaration, that, "In an honest service, there are commonly low wages and hard labor; in this,—plenty, satiety, pleasure and ease, liberty, and power; and who would not balance creditor on this side, when all the hazard that is run for it at worst, is only a sour look or two at choking? No,—a merry life and a short one, shall be my motto!" But it was one favorable trait in his character, that he never forced any man into the pirate service.

The prisoners were strictly guarded while on board, and being conveyed to Cape Coast castle, they underwent a long and solemn trial. The generality of them remained daring and impenitent for some time, but when they found themselves confined within a castle, and their fate drawing near, they changed their course, and became serious, penitent, and fervent in their devotions. Though the judges found no small difficulty in explaining the law, and different acts of parliament, yet the facts were so numerous and flagrant which were proved against them, that there was no difficulty in bringing in a verdict of guilty.