

# THE WOMEN PIRATES OF AMERICA



It is all in the point of view. Poets have sung of the glories of Cleopatra, yet Cleopatra was a criminal. Historians point to Catherine as one of Russia's greatest rulers, yet Catherine was a savage. Elizabeth ranks high among the

monarchs of England, yet Elizabeth was a ruthless creature who sent many men and women to the block, and who signed the death warrant of her cousin, Mary Queen of Scots, without a qualm or a quiver. In her humble way, Mary Reed was a Cleopatra, a Catherine and an Elizabeth. She had the romantic, adventurous disposition of the daughter of the Nile, the sturdy, masculine, soldierly qualities of the terrible Russian and the careless ways and volatile temper of the free-living Queen Bess. She was the greatest woman pirate the world ever has known, and, like the three great queens, she was a creature of circumstance to a large degree. If she had any regret because, instead of piracy, a quiet, home life and a loving husband had not been her destiny, she did not give expression to it. In fact, she seemed to like her calling, and in a naive, philosophic sort of way she would argue on the justice and injustice of piracy and the beneficial effect hanging had upon keeping the ranks of the pirates from being overcrowded.

"Were it not for the fact that the rope dangles before their eyes as a menace," she remarked in a conversation with the judge who sentenced her to death, "all the cowards would turn pirate and so infest the seas that men of courage would starve. If I had my way I would not make the penalty for piracy anything less than death. It is the fear of the noose that has kept many miserable, dastardly rogues honest, and it is the fear of the noose, too, that keeps on land many of those who now rob the widows and the orphans and who oppress the poor who have no money to seek justice. If it were not for the noose the seas would be as crowded with rogues as the land, and there would be so much plundering of ships that merchants after a while would not send vessels out except under the safest of armed escort. "Under such conditions, my dear sir," she said gravely to the judge, "my trade in a little time would not be worth following."

It was at Port Royal, Jamaica, November 20, 1720, that Mary Reed was tried. Another woman pirate, Anne Bonney, was on trial with her, as were Capt. John Rackam and eight men of Rackam's crew. The nine men and the two women were sentenced to death, and that same day Rackam and two of the men were taken to Gallows point and hanged. So far as is known this is the only instance not only of woman pirates being sentenced to death, but of woman pirates being brought to trial. It is recorded that the women showed a higher degree of courage in the presence of the judge than did their man companions, but that is not to be marveled at, for the women had displayed far more bravery in the sea fight in which they were captured than did Rackam or any of the others. In fact, throughout the years in which the two women sailed with Rackam they were the sturdiest fighters on board. Had Rackam and his men the same spirit as the women that sea fight probably would have had a different ending.

Piracy was in its decadence in the day of Rackam, and Rackam probably would have received little or no notice in history but for Mary Reed and Anne Bonney.

Morgan, prince of pirates, was dead. Roc, the Brazilian, had paid the penalty of his crimes; Bartholemey, L'Olonnois, De Lusan and the other commanders of the golden days of the buccanniers were memories only; but throughout the West Indies there were enough bands of sea robbers to make life lively for the Spaniard or any other captain who sailed those waters. Rackam had been quartermaster on the pirate ship commanded by Capt. Charles Vane, and when Vane, November 24, 1718, was deposed for cowardice in refusing to attack a French man-of-war, Rackam was chosen captain in his place.

In the two years in which Rackam cruised around Cuba, Bermuda, the Bahamas, and made occasional raids along the Caribbean coast, Mary Reed was second in command and Anne Bonney was one of the crew. The pirates captured several vessels, attacked some small towns and got a fair amount of plunder, and made themselves so much of a menace that a pardon was offered to them and to all other pirates operating in the gulf if they would return to honest ways. But although most of the other pirates were glad of the opportunity to wash the slate clean, not so with Rackam and the women. They refused, and so became the mark for all the English, French and Spanish vessels of war that were in the West Indies.

It was early in November, 1720, that a small English warship sighted Rackam's brigantine off Jamaica. The two vessels were pretty well matched and in the early stages of the fight all the chances favored the pirates, but sea robbers never did have much stomach for fighting against the English, and when one of the guns on the brigantine burst and it was necessary to close with the enemy if victory was to be achieved, Rackam rushed to his cabin and sought solace in the brandy bottle. In vain did Mary Reed and Anne Bonney

plead with and threaten the rest. The example of the captain was too much for them. After firing a few more shots at the Englishman they, too, sought refuge and solace in the cabin, all but one. This one remained on deck with the two women and fought the ship until the last. In one desperate effort to get the men back on deck Mary Reed went to the cabin door and, firing into the crowd, threatened death to every one of them who continued to act the coward. Her shot killed one man, but the others stuck to the cabin and refused to come out.

When the English swarmed on board she, in disgust, surrendered the brigantine, and thereafter, both by the commander of the warship and by the civil authorities she was treated as the real head of the pirate band. Her contempt for Rackam and the men was shared by Anne Bonney, who was the captain's mistress. A short time before he was hanged Rackam got permission to see this woman to bid farewell to her. Instead of condoling with him, she told him that if he had fought like a man in all probability he would not have gone to the gallows. She was sorry for him, of course, she acknowledged, but not sorry enough to shed tears. She besought him, however, to go to his death like a man and so wipe out as far as possible the memory of his craven conduct in the fight.

Rackam and the two men sentenced to die with him that day went to the gallows smilingly. The other men of the band were hanged in the February following, but although neither Mary Reed nor Anne Bonney sought or expected clemency the authorities refused to hang them. There was as much, if not more, of an abhorrence to inflicting the death penalty on women in those days as there is in these times, and as the stories of the two woman pirates became known through their conversations with the Port Royal judge people came to look upon them as

more sinned against than sinning. Mary Reed, it was learned, had been born in England and had been bred and reared in deception. Her mother, when very young, had married a youth who soon after their marriage went to sea and never returned. The fruit of this marriage was a son. A year later Mary was born, and, the son dying, Mary's mother decided to substitute her illegitimate child for the legitimate one in order to have the child come in for the wealth of her husband's mother. Mary, therefore, was reared as a boy. As she grew up her mother explained to her the secret of her birth and the necessity for concealing her sex. At various times the grandmother wanted to adopt the child, but this the mother, of course, would not consent to. Instead, each time she got the old woman to increase the allowance made on account of the child. Occasionally the mother and grandmother quarreled and, unfortunately for Mary, the old woman died at such a time and left Mary without a shilling. The child being no longer a source of income to her, the mother had no further use for Mary and so abandoned her.

Mary, garbed as a boy, reared as a boy and having had the companionship only of boys all her life, now could do nothing except look for work as a boy. She had the good fortune to obtain a position as footboy to a Frenchwoman of wealth, and she remained in this position several years. As she grew in years and strength she got tired of servile employment and began to look about for something else. Having a love for the sea and a touch of romance in her disposition, she enlisted on a man-of-war. Here she learned enough of seamanship to fit her well for the part she was to play later on in life. After several cruises she sought adventure ashore and went to Flanders, where she enlisted in a regiment of infantry as a cadet. She was a brave, dashing soldier, but there was little chance for a poor soldier, no matter how brave or how dashing, to advance in those days, for commissions were bought and sold and the person without money might serve throughout life without promotion.

Giving up the infantry in disgust, Mary next enlisted in a cavalry regiment. In this she distinguished herself so as to win the applause and esteem of all the officers of the regiment. Just then romance entered the life of Mary to bring confu-

sion to her. She was very brave and she was very modest. She had the faculty of most brave persons of winning the affectionate regard of their companions. The tent companion of Mary was a handsome young Flemish trooper, who thought Mary was the bravest young man in the world. No wonder that Mary, her natural tendencies checked and distorted throughout her young life, should fall passionately in love with him. The violence of her feelings was such that she neglected all her soldierly duties and acted so peculiarly that she was considered insane. One day when the handsome trooper was expressing his sorrow over her condition she astonished him by throwing herself into his arms and telling him she was a woman. But his astonishment was no greater than that of the entire regiment the next day when the two troopers were married in public. All the officers were present and so were thousands of citizens.

Married and dressed for the first time in her life in the clothes women wear, Mary left the army and with her husband opened an inn, and for luck called it the Three Horseshoes. She had a fair measure of luck for a few years and was well on the road to prosperity and ease when her husband died, the wars ended, business fell off to little or nothing and she was left once more with a problem of making a living for herself.

There was not much opportunity for her in Europe, she thought. Anyhow, the death of her husband had cut all the ties that held her there, so she engaged passage for America in a French ship. For an unattached young woman to make the trip across the ocean in those days was unthought of, so for her own protection she resumed the garb of a man. The ship she sailed in was captured by English pirates, and as she was the only English-speaking person on board the pirates, after plundering the vessel and its passengers of everything of value, took her on board their craft and allowed the French ship to proceed. They had no idea she was other than she seemed to be—a fine, handsome, rosy-cheeked young Englishman—and she became one of the pirate crew. There was nothing else for her to do. She continued with the pirates for several months, and then, the British government having made one of its periodical offers to pirates to pardon those who would surrender by a certain day, the crew availed themselves

of the opportunity, went to Jamaica, were officially forgiven, and, having sold their plunder to good advantage, proceeded to enjoy the fruits of their adventures. When their money was spent they heard that Capt. Rodgers was fitting out vessels in the island of New Providence for privateering. This suited them admirably, so a fair number of them, among the lot being Vane and Rackam, offered their services to Rodgers.

"What else could I do?" Mary asked the judge when she got to this point in her narrative. "There was no way for an honest woman to make a living in Jamaica, as well you know, and even though I detest the life the pirate leads, and even though I abhor bloodshed and crime, I have the same love of life that every human creature has, and, wanting to preserve my life and get out of it everything I can, I was constrained to become a pirate once more, because there was nothing else for me to turn to."

The ship fitted out by Rodgers hardly had sailed when Mary and her companions mutinied and ran up the black flag. Vane was selected as captain and Rackam quartermaster. For several years the pirates ranged the gulf, preying on friend and foe. At times they had plenty, but more times they were poor. Then came the time when Vane was unwilling to give battle to a French warship and Rackam supplanted him as captain. With the selection of Rackam as captain there came to the pirate ship Anne Bonney, the woman to whom he was attached. She dressed in a mixed costume, half male, half female. In all the contests in which the brigantine engaged she was as resolute and as good a fighter as any man aboard.

One of the queer things in connection with this strange pair of women is that it was through Anne Bonney that the sex of Mary Reed was discovered. Mary was no less modest than she was brave and no one on board suspected her as being other than she seemed. Anne Bonney, coarse and of a far different stripe than Mary, was much impressed by the rosy cheeks and dashing appearance of Mary and aroused the jealousy of Rackam. The captain became so violent that Mary thought it prudent to reveal her secret to Anne.

But the secret was not to remain long

a secret. Soon after the arrival of Anne Bonney aboard, the brigantine captured a ship and among the prisoners taken was a young artist of engaging manners. Mary Reed straightway fell in love with him. Her love was put to a severe test before many days, for the artist, having quarreled with one of the pirates, challenged him to a duel, which they agreed to fight ashore. Mary had doubts about the courage of the man she loved, or possibly she loved him so much that she would not let him risk his life. At any rate, she sought a quarrel with the pirate and insisted on fighting him before the hour set for the duel with the artist.

Mary and the pirate fought with pistol and sword and after a short engagement she left him for dead on the field. It was after that duel that Mary confessed her love to the artist. They pledged their faith, which they deemed as binding as if the ceremony had been performed by a clergyman.

From the notes of those who attended the trial of this woman there is furnished this description of her: "She is handsome, robust and showy or distinguished in appearance. That she is capable of great exertion and of sustaining great fatigue no one need doubt after surveying her big frame. She is rather vain in some respects, and particularly of her success in deceiving the world as to her sex. She is susceptible of the tenderest emotions and the most genuine affections. Although she was inadvertently drawn into piracy, this horrible mode of life has not stained her character, and she possesses a rectitude of principle and of conduct far superior to many who have not been exposed to such temptations."

Although the woman appeared robust to all who saw her in court, she was far from well. Her condition was such that her execution was postponed several times. She grew worse rapidly and then she died.

It is unlikely that she would have been hanged even if she had not been stricken with illness, but, at any rate, her death saved Anne Bonney, for whom there was not so much sympathy expressed as for Mary Reed.

The Bonney woman was Irish, having been born in Cork. Her father was a lawyer of prominence, who deserted his wife and eloped to America with one of his servants, taking Anne with him. He settled in South Carolina and became one of the rich planters of that part of America. When his servant-wife died Anne superintended the household. The girl was looked upon as one of the great heiresses of the Carolinas, and her father planned a brilliant match for her, but she was of his own blood and ran away with a common sailor. The young people fled to New Providence, where the sailor expected to find employment. They tired of each other quickly, and one day she left him and joined Capt. Rackam. She went to sea in men's clothes at first, and then compromised on a combination costume that was both picturesque and suitable to her business. It was by no means cumbersome, and she took to piracy with a relish, apparently rejoicing in its freedom, and having no moral qualms about robbing or killing.

She was known to many of the planters of Jamaica, who had been guests at her father's plantation in the Carolinas, and these men interceded at her trial, but she had become so gross and sodden through her life with the pirates that this intercession amounted to little. She was relieved from time to time, however, and when Mary Reed died all pretense of carrying out the sentence in Anne Bonney's case was dropped. She never was pardoned, and she never was officially set free, but one day the prison doors were opened and she was permitted to walk out.

And when she disappeared the last woman pirate of which there is record passed from view.

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