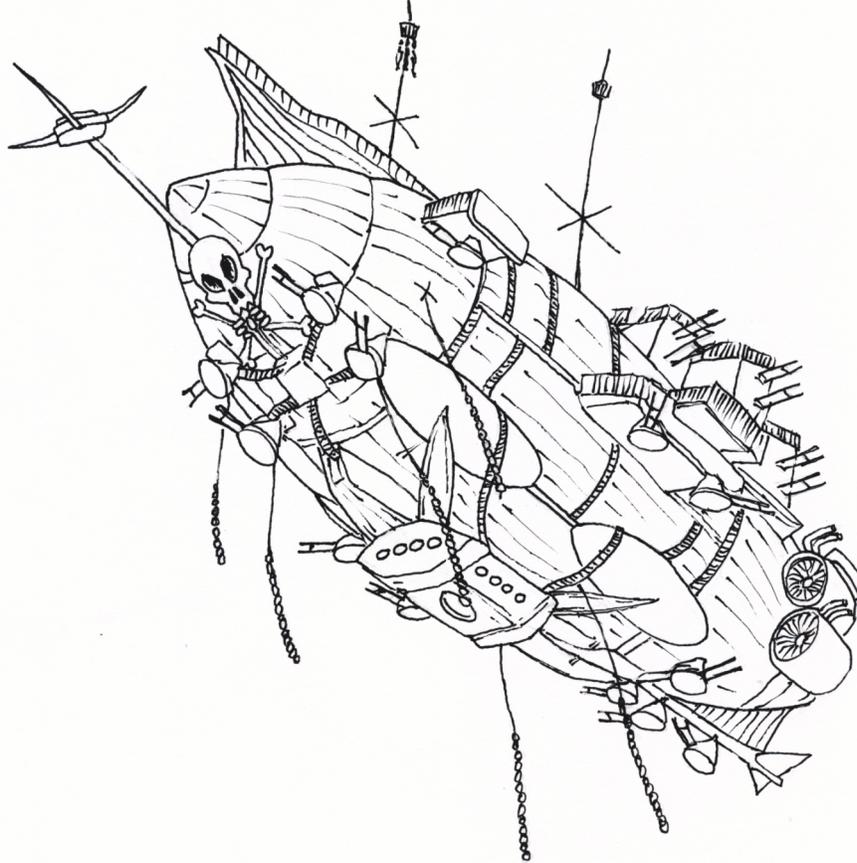


Pirate Hunter Maynard



A few metric tons of ballast dropped into the streets of Oakland. The starboard turbines roared into life, and wreathed in a slow-drifting shroud of diesel smoke, the *Pirate Zeppelin Revenge* turned toward the sunset, and plowed through the sky towards San Francisco.

"Maynard!" groaned the first mate, Israel Hands. "If Maynard be hunting for us, I say we should run ourselves further inland!"

"Edward Teach never runs from a fight!" bellowed the captain, turning his back on Hands and looking out over the bay.

"But he's unstoppable!" wailed a crewman. "He wrecked the Great Morgan! He captured Kidd single-handed!"

Captain Teach leaped down to the deck, and savagely kicked the pirate who had spoken. "Belay your tongue! Morgan was myth! And Kidd was a bleeding fool!" he shouted. "They say Maynard's the greatest of the Pirate Hunters; Well I say he hasn't yet crossed swords with the greatest of the Pirates! Let him come!"

The pirates scattered, fleeing the wrath of the captain, running for their battle

stations.

"Captain!" called Israel Hands, "We haves no more'n a tenth-charge in the batteries! T'won't be enough to fire the rail-cannons!"

"Batten down the chargers!" shouted Captain Teach, "Full power to the turbines, fore and aft! We'll run for the city and tap their fields!"

Now over water, still casting its long shadow back over land, the *Revenge's* powerful turbines kicked up a salt spray from the surface of the bay below.

Pirates scurried up and down the lattice of chain ladders that wrapped around the mizzenballoon, manning vents and valves. Others rushed to rewire the rail cannons from the chargers to the tapper.

"There he be." said Hands, pointing.

Framed perfectly between the standing halves of the Golden Gate Bridge was the distant silhouette of a Royal Airship of the Line, far out to sea.

"Keep for the city!" ordered Teach. "All hands out-deck! Man your weapons!"

The city loomed before them, brightening in the falling night. The air was crystal clear, and the lights of the skyscrapers sparkled.

"Hard a topside!" called Teach, and Hands ratcheted back the helm, and the turbines roared, and the *Revenge* rose as it passed over the boardwalk, and barely rising faster than the steepness of the hill, so that the trailing antennae cables from the under-deck struck rooftops and shattered windows with brilliant pops of grounded static. Up then, up between the skyscrapers, and higher, clearing the skyscrapers and the spire of the Transamerica pyramid.

"What's that cur waiting for?" asked the Captain, watching the Airship on the horizon with his binoculars.

"Captain?" asked Hands, limping up close behind him. "Captain? May I ask ye,"

"Why hasn't he moved?" demanded the captain. "It looks like he's hovering at anchor!"

"Does yer wife know where ye buried the Plutonium?" asked Hands anxiously.

"The Witch knows nothing!" laughed Teach harshly, and continued scrutinizing the lurking Royal Airship of the Line.

"What if ye, God forbid, what if ye dies? Doesn't anyone know where ye buried it?" asked Hands.

Teach turned, eyes burning, black eyebrows curling. "Only I and the Devil himself know where it's hid, and may the longest-living fiend take all!"

Suddenly there came a chorus of cries from the aft-decks; "Maynard! Maynard!" screamed the men, "He's come for us!"

"Acid Rain and Brimstone!" shouted Teach, spinning around.

The twin thunder of a machine gun and a propeller engine ripped the air, and a single-seater biplane painted in the Queen's colors screamed past just meters

above the topside-deck.

"Man the rail cannons!" roared Teach, but no-one listened. The pirates were panicking, fleeing for cover, clawing at each-other to get to the ladders.

The aft-chamber of the mizzenballoon hissed, punctured by Maynard's bullets.

Teach drew his gauss pistol, and silently shot a running pirate. The dead man hit the deck with a thick thud, and the other pirates froze in their tracks.

"If I don't kill one of you myself every once in a while, you'll forget who I am!" Shouted Teach. "Patch the mizzenballoon! Man the rail cannons! Open the taper!"

The *Revenge* slid keel-first down below the roofs of the skyscrapers as the pirates rushed to patch the holes in the balloon. Maynard's biplane thundered overhead again, but this time he did not fire his machine guns.

Teach shook his fist in the air.

"Clever lad!" said Hands. "He knows we can out-gun any Airship on the Line, so he comes at us in a heavier-than-air!"

"Arrogant pigeon-rat!" ranted Teach. "Thinks he can out-maneuver me? I'll show him the power of The *Revenge*!"

With a percussive ripple of electricity, the taper came on line, and every light in every window in every building in San Francisco dimmed.

Maynard's biplane soared past on the port side, and the voice of the Pirate Hunter boomed out over a loudspeaker. "Surrender, and prepare to be boarded!"

"All rails-a-port! Fire!" shouted Teach.

Every light in the city flickered dark for an instant, the buckles on Teach's uniform jumped, and the chain ladders rippled upward violently, and with 32 tiny sonic booms, a volley of 32 slugs of ferrous iron blasted holes through a whole row of skyscrapers.

Pushed sideways by the magnetic recoil of the cannons, the *Revenge* slid sideways through the air, and brushed against the edifice of an adjacent skyscraper. Already mostly patched, the aft-chamber of the mizzenballoon began to re-inflate, and the *Revenge* rose.

"Starboard turbines full, turn about!" Shouted Teach, as Maynard circled again.

"Why isn't he firing back?" demanded Teach. "He hasn't fired since his first pass! All rails-a-starboard! Fire at will!"

The starboard rail cannons fired deafeningly, two, three, eight, five, supersonic slugs of metal missed Maynard and pierced into the city, flinging brick and asphalt and parked cars dancing into the air like embers from a firecracker.

"We be too low, Says I!" exclaimed Hands. "He won't risk strafing the buildings!"

Teach grinned evilly. "Hard-a-keelside!" he shouted, "Fly lower! Make him follow us!"

Hands leaned on the helm, and the *Revenge* dove, running the street like a canyon.

Maynard's plane did a loop, and dove after them.

"All rails! Fire at will!" shouted Teach.

Angled back, the rail-cannons boomed, tearing holes through the skyscrapers with each miss, sending slugs high into the night stars, not to fall again this side of the horizon. With each shot, the city blinked black.

And with a crash that sounded too small to be final, half of Maynard's plane vanished in the blink of an eye. Splinters of wing spread through the air like pollen, and the remaining half of the plane slammed into a building in flames. The pirates let out a cheer.

Captain Teach's laughter died in his mouth. There, from the trajectory of the plane came a lone man wearing a rocket-pack.

Maynard began to speak even before he touched down, his voiced amplified by a hidden loudspeaker. "Lay down your weapons and surrender your Airship!"

"Damn you for a villain! Who are you, and from whence came you!?" Roared Teach, drawing his gauss pistol and his sword.

Maynard landed on the deck, and strode forward without hesitation, Clean-shaven, square-shouldered of uniform with chrome buttons glistening in the light of the burning skyscrapers. "You know by my colors I am no pirate. My name is Lieutenant Robert Maynard, of the Royal Navy of Her Majesty, Queen Alice III of Oceanea., and you, Edward Jonas Teach, Alias Blackbeard, Alias *Commodore of California*, Captain of the *Pirate Zeppelin Revenge*; by the authority of the Queen, and by the order of the Governor of Japan, I place you under arrest! Lay down your weapons and surrender your ship!"

Captain Teach laughed. "The Governor of Japan has no jurisdiction here; And the local authorities have been full well supportive of my presence here!" he said, pointing with his sword to the trio of well-dressed corpses dangling from the crows-nest above the fore-balloon.

"Your crimes against the citizens of California will not go unpunished!" said Maynard, drawing his own sword and gauss pistol. Then to the other pirates he called, "It will go better with you all if you resist no further! Your captain cannot save you from justice now!"

"Hands!" Teach whispered to his first mate. "You remember that Plutonium? I didn't bury it all." He flexed his hand to reveal the dead-man's switch built into the hilt of his sword. "If I die, then the *Revenge* goes up to Davy Jones' Mushroom-Cloud with me!"

"Lord help us all!" moaned Hands, turning white. "To arms men!" he shouted, "Defend the captain!"

"Belay that order!" roared Teach. "This duel is mine!"

In unison, the two raised their gauss pistols and shot each other. Maynard missed, but Teach's slug struck the pirate hunter, marring his bright uniform, and leaving his arm and side bloodied.

"No mercy will be given you." sneered Teach.

"And none will be asked for!" replied Maynard.

Both men flew at each other, swords raised, and when they clashed in the center of the deck, a shower of sparks erupted from their electrified blades. They moved like wrath and thunder, both Maynard and Teach being masters of the lost art of swordplay. The other pirates crowded around, pistols ready.

"Hold yer fire men!" shouted Hands. "Don't risk hitting the captain!"

"You'll pay for those Airships you scuttled in Hawaii!" said Maynard, through clenched teeth.

Swords rang and sparks flew.

"I don't know what your talking about." said Teach. "I wasn't even there that day."

"All those men you killed in Panama will be avenged!" said Maynard.

"They had it coming to them!" replied Teach fiercely, as he wounded Maynard with a slash and a flash that cut and cauterized at the same time.

"You'll pay for that Plutonium you stole in Nevada!" said Maynard, stolidly, clutching the burn on his chest with one hand, and fighting on with the other.

Teach's eyes widened, laughing like the madman he was, his black whiskers flying in the wind. "Oh, I will! I will!" he said, "You have no idea how right you are!" Teach flexed his fist around the kill switch in his sword hilt.

With a sudden lunge, Maynard lashed out and separated Teach's head from his shoulders, dropped his own sword, and seized Teach's sword before it fell from the dead captain's fingers.

Captain Teach's head rolled across the deck and stopped at the feet of Israel Hands, staring up wide-eyed into the starry sky, and smoldering from the neck.

Maynard held Blackbeard's sword high above his head. "Surrender, if you value your lives!"

"Do as he says!" cried Hands.

The Royal Airship of the Line had moved unseen during the battle, and was now standing close over the Golden Gate, waiting silently to escort the *Revenge* away.

"Now throw your weapons overboard, and turn this Airship out to sea." commanded Maynard. "Justice has come for you, as it does to all who defile the open skies."

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