

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE NIGHT OF THE 8TH OF MARCH—THE BATTLE BETWEEN THE "MERRIMAC" AND "MONITOR"—REMARKS UPON THIS BATTLE—INJURIES OF THE "MERRIMAC"—WHAT WAS EXPECTED OF HER NORTH AND SOUTH—WHAT SHE COULD NOT HAVE DONE—THE CASE OF CAPTAIN SMITH AND LIEUTENANT PENDERGRAST—WHAT A WHITE FLAG SIGNIFIES—LIEUTENANT JOS. B. SMITH—COMMODORE TATTNALL RELIEVES ADMIRAL BUCHANAN IN THE COMMAND—HIS CHARACTER—PREPARATIONS FOR ANOTHER BATTLE.

WHEN we retired the night of the 8th of March we hoped to accomplish a great day's work the following day. The *Minnesota* was aground, the *Roanoke* and *St. Lawrence* had retired below Old Point, and we knew the enemy was greatly demoralized. We did not know how much; no mortal man could have surmised what we afterwards knew; but we intended to destroy the *Minnesota* and then to see what we could do with the vessels below Old Point. But "the best laid plans of mice and men," etc. We had heard of the *Monitor*; though I believe our authorities did not know much about her, or how near she was to completion.

Shortly after 8 A. M. on the 9th the squadron got underway and the *Merrimac* proceeded towards the *Minnesota*, closely attended by the *Patrick Henry*. The *Monitor* now made her appearance—some one said she looked like a cheese-box. She engaged the *Merrimac* for some time, the wooden vessels looking on. It was a naval duel, though the *Merrimac* occasionally fired at the *Minnesota* and received her shot in return. It appeared to be a battle between a giant and a pigmy; but it should be remembered that the *Merrimac* was very hard to manage and drew twenty-two feet water, whereas the *Monitor* was readily handled, and drew but

ten feet water. In point of fact, it was not necessary to manœuvre the *Monitor* at all; for as her turret revolved, all she had to do was to remain still. This indeed is one of the strong points of this class of vessels in fighting in rivers or shallow water. They can always bring a gun to bear as long as the turret will revolve.

After some time, the *Merrimac* succeeded in ramming the *Monitor*; but her prow had been broken off in ramming the *Cumberland* the day before, and she did her no harm. The *Monitor* in turn attempted to run close to the stern of the *Merrimac* in the hope of disabling her rudder, but was not successful. Towards 12 o'clock the *Monitor* steamed down towards Old Point, and the *Merrimac*, after waiting awhile, turned in the direction of Norfolk. The signal was made to follow her, and the squadron proceeded up to the Navy Yard, where we arrived at 2 P. M. and sent our wounded men to the Naval Hospital. The *Merrimac* went into dock at six o'clock the same day.

Much has been written and more said about this celebrated fight—the first encounter between iron-clads in the world's history. Viewing it as I did at a distance of more than a mile, I will state that my impression at the time was that, after hammering away at each other for three hours, and finding that the men were wearied out, without making much impression on either side, both vessels had simultaneously drawn off, and decided to consider it a drawn battle; that, in fact,

"Each took off his several way.
Resolved to meet some other day."

A careful analysis of the testimony on both sides has since convinced me that the *Monitor* withdrew first, and ran into shoal water—she gave up the contest. It seems to me that Captain Van Brunt's testimony should be conclusive on this point. His vessel was on shore and her fate depended upon the result of the encounter—he must have closely noted it. He says (the italics are mine): "For some time after this the

rebels concentrated their whole battery upon the tower and pilot-house of the Monitor, and soon after the latter stood down for Fortress Monroe, and we thought it probable she had exhausted her supply of ammunition or sustained some injury. Soon after the *Merrimac* and the two other steamers headed for my ship, and I then felt to the fullest extent my condition. I was hard and immovably aground, and they could take position under my stern and rake me. I had expended most of my solid shot; my ship was badly crippled, and my officers and men were worn out with fatigue: but even in this extreme dilemma, I determined never to give up the ship to the rebels, and, after consulting with my officers, I ordered every preparation to be made to destroy the ship, after all hope was gone of saving her. On ascending the poop-deck I observed that the enemy's vessels had changed their course and were heading for Craney Island."

Why the *Merrimac* did not persist in destroying the *Minnesota* I never exactly understood. But the reasons were satisfactory to her commander and his officers, and to Captain Tucker; and no man who knew this group of highly-distinguished and gallant officers can doubt but that they were sufficient. Whatever the cause, candor compels me to say that the *Merrimac* failed to reap the fruits of her victory. She went out to destroy the *Minnesota*, and do what further damage to the enemy she could. The *Monitor* was there to save the *Minnesota*. The *Merrimac* did not accomplish her purpose. The *Monitor* did. She did it by resisting the *Merrimac* as long as she did, even if she did have to withdraw. The *Minnesota* was gotten afloat that night and towed below Old Point. I suspect the *Merrimac* was making more water from the leak in her bow than her officers were willing to admit. She lost her prow in ramming the *Cumberland*. In reference to ramming the *Monitor*, Boatswain Hasker says in his account: "We drove our stem apron in when we struck the *Monitor*, which caused our ship to leak; which leak was stopped partially by shoving a bale of oakum against the stem apron;"

and again: "in consequence of our stem being twisted, we were leaking badly, and only had time to steam to Norfolk and get into the dry-dock by high water."

Captain Catesby Ap. R. Jones in a letter to the Southern Historical Society Papers, says: "The official report says our loss is 2 killed and 19 wounded: the stem is twisted, and the ship leaks; we have lost the prow, starboard anchor, and all the boats; the armor is somewhat damaged, the steam-pipe and smoke-stack both riddled; the muzzles of two of her guns shot away. None were killed or wounded in the fight with the *Monitor*. The only damage she did was to the armor. She fired 41 shots. We were enabled to receive most of them obliquely. The effect of a shot striking obliquely on the shield was to break all the iron and sometimes to displace several feet of the outside course; the wooden backing would not be broken through. When a shot struck directly at right angles the wood would also be broken through, but not displaced. The shield was never pierced. The ship was docked. A prow of steel and wrought-iron put on, and a course of 2-inch iron on the hull below the roof, extending in length 180 ft. Want of time and material prevented its completion. The damage to the armor was repaired; wrought-iron port-shutters were fitted, etc. The rifle guns were supplied with bolts of wrought and chilled iron. The ship was brought a foot deeper in the water, making her draft 23 feet."

Upon our return to Norfolk, which was on Sunday, March 9th, the whole city was alive with joy and excitement. Nothing was talked of but the *Merrimac* and what she had accomplished. As to what she could do in the future, no limit was set to her powers. The papers indulged in the wildest speculations, and everybody went mad, as usual. At the North the same fever prevailed. No battle that was ever fought caused as great a sensation throughout the civilized world. The moral effect at the North was most marvelous; and even now I can scarcely realize it. The people of New York and Washington were in hourly expectation of the *Merrimac's* appear-

ance off those cities, and I suppose were ready to yield at the first summons. At the South it was expected that she would take Fortress Monroe when she again went out. I recollect trying to explain to a gentleman at the time how absurd it was to expect this of her. I told him that she might bombard Fortress Monroe all day without doing it any considerable damage; that she would get out of ammunition; that she carried but 350 men, and could not land a force even if her boats were not shot away, though they would be; that, in fine, I would be willing to take up my quarters in the casemates there and let the *Merrimac* hammer away for a month,—but all to no purpose; the impression had been made on him: a gun mounted on an iron-clad must be capable of doing more damage than one on a wooden vessel. An idea once fixed cannot be eradicated: just as we hear people say every day that Jackson at New Orleans defeated the veterans of Waterloo!

As to the *Merrimac* going to New York, she would have foundered as soon as she got outside of Cape Henry. She could not have lived in Hampton Roads in a moderate sea. She was just buoyant enough to float when she had a few days coal and water on board. A little more would have sent her to the bottom. When she rammed the *Cumberland* she dipped forward until the water nearly entered her bow port; had it done so she would have gone down. Perhaps it was fortunate for her that her prow did break off, otherwise she might not have extricated herself. I served afterward in the *Palmetto State*, a vessel of similar construction to the *Merrimac*, but much more buoyant; yet I have seen the time when we were glad to get under a lee even in Charleston harbor. The *Merrimac* with but a few days' stores on board drew 22½ feet water. She could not have gone to Baltimore or Washington without lightening her very much. This would have brought her unarmored hull out of the water and then she would no longer have been an iron-clad! I was not so much surprised at the extravagant expectations of the southern people who, necessa-

rily knew but little of such matters; but I must say I could not have imagined the extent of the demoralization which existed at Fortress Monroe and in the Federal fleet on the 8th and 9th of March. I have been told by an officer of high rank, who was present in the fort, that if the *Merrimac* had fired a shot at it on the 8th the general in command would have surrendered it; and, if I am not very much mistaken, I have seen a dispatch from that general to the effect that if the *Merrimac* passed Fortress Monroe it must necessarily fall! After this one can well understand what Napoleon has said in reference to the moral as compared to the physical effect in war.

Upon my reporting the facts in relation to Captain Smith and Lieutenant Pendergrast a question was raised as to whether they were not prisoners on parole. Questions of the kind were crudely treated by our navy department. The Secretary himself was ignorant of naval laws, customs and precedents; and his immediate advisers were in the same category. The older officers who had served in the war of 1812, and whose experience gave them a knowledge of such matters, were not consulted by him. Those about the Secretary were men who had not seen much service in war. It was held that Smith and Pendergrast had escaped, and should either deliver themselves up or refuse to serve until regularly exchanged. I, on the contrary, insisted that they were not bound to do so. They had been prisoners it is true—so had every officer and man of the *Congress* been; but I left them, and after the *Beaufort* left the side of the *Congress* they had no opportunity of getting back to her and they escaped to the shore as the others did. The officers and men of the Confederate man-of-war *Alabama* escaped, after her capture by the U. S. ship *Kearsarge*, under precisely the same circumstances—the enemy failed to take possession of them.

Some time after, when Pendergrast was unfortunate enough to be captured in the *Water Witch*, a question was raised in Savannah, where he had been taken, as to his conduct in reference to the *Congress* affair. I immediately wrote to

Commodore Tattnall, commanding the station, completely exonerating him from any unofficerlike or improper conduct on that occasion. I justified his action in every particular. Commodore Barron was a prisoner at the time and if I had held Captain Smith, could have been exchanged for him, but as I have said, I did not know it was Captain Smith; not expecting to see a senior officer to the lieutenant who said he commanded the ship. No one regretted more than I did that the result could not have been different; but I should have permitted him to return to the *Congress*, under the circumstances, if he had combined in himself the entire Smith family.

Conversing with an "official" afterwards, he said it was a pity I had not sent for pen, ink and paper at the time, and made them write out a written parole. Mark Twain, in describing a trip to Bermuda, says there was a young man on board known as the "Ass," and there was also on board an old man, whom he calls the "Ancient," who was returning to Bermuda after an absence of twenty-seven years. Upon their arrival a faded old gentleman stood up before the "Ancient," and asked him if he knew him. The "Ancient," after hesitating some time said: "There's something about you that's just as familiar to me as ——" "*Likely it might be his hat,*" murmured the "Ass," with sympathetic interest. "The bearing of this remark lies in the application of it," said Jack Bunsby.

The *Congress* did not haul her colors down, but hoisted a white flag. This is unusual in naval warfare. We had the right to continue to fire on her until she struck her colors, [unless it had appeared that her colors were nailed to the mast and could not be lowered. A white flag does not necessarily imply a surrender; it signifies a parley. It is used by armies desiring to communicate and by fortresses preparatory to making terms; but ships at sea necessarily surrender unconditionally and they do so by lowering their colors. The historian of the French navy, *La Perouse de Bon Fils*, mentions an instance where a French line of battle ship hoisted a

white flag and made terms. He says it is the only case on record, and I believe he is correct.

Midshipman Mallory whom I first sent on board the *Congress* told me upon his return that he had seen the body of her commander, Lieutenant Joseph B. Smith, laid out on the main deck. Smith was a classmate of mine, and I had last met him in Rio when I was on my return home in the *Merrimac*. I spent the night with him on board the *Congress*. His character cannot be better illustrated than by the following incident: During the fight of the 8th the authorities in Washington were kept informed of the events as they occurred. Admiral Joseph B. Smith (the father of the lieutenant) was the chief of one of the departments. Upon being told that the *Congress* had surrendered, he replied: "Then Joe is dead!" Mallory showed me a sword he had taken from the *Congress*, and upon examining it I found "Jos. B. Smith" engraved on the blade. With Mallory's consent I gave it to Commodore Tattnall, who sent it with a kind letter to his old shipmate Admiral Smith.

Flag Officer Franklin Buchanan who was promoted to the grade of admiral for his great services in the *Merrimac* was too badly wounded to retain his command, and Flag Officer Josiah Tattnall was detailed to relieve him. Lieutenant J. Pembroke Jones was selected by Commodore Tattnall as his flag lieutenant to succeed Lieutenant Robert D. Minor who was also still suffering from his wounds. Commodore Tattnall entered the U. S. Navy in 1812; served in the U. S. frigate *Constellation* in the defence of Norfolk in that war, and distinguished himself while in command of the little steamer *Spitfire* during the Mexican war. Though opposed to secession, he promptly resigned his commission upon learning of the secession of his native State, Georgia. He was a striking-looking man, nearly six feet in height, with a florid complexion, deep-sunk blue eyes, and a protruding under lip. He was a chivalric gentleman, of pure character and untarnished reputation. No man stood higher in either the United States or Confederate Navy; and much was expected

of him when he assumed the command, which he did on the 29th of March, 1862. His appointment gave great satisfaction to the entire squadron; and our damages being now repaired, we began to look forward to another trial of strength in Hampton Roads.

CHAPTER XXV.

OUR PLAN FOR BOARDING AND SMOTHERING THE "MONITOR"—THE "MERRIMAC" CHALLENGES THE "MONITOR" TO BATTLE—WE CAPTURE THREE VESSELS—OPERATIONS IN HAMPTON ROADS ON THE 11TH OF APRIL, 1862—REMARKS ON—THE "MERRIMAC" DRIVES THE VESSELS EMPLOYED IN BOMBARDING SEAWELL'S POINT UNDER THE GUNS OF FORT MONROE—THE "MONITOR" DECLINES TO FIGHT THE "MERRIMAC"—AM ORDERED TO COMMAND THE "DIXIE"—EVACUATION OF NORFOLK BY THE CONFEDERATES—COMMODORE JOHN RODGERS—HIS ATTACK ON DRURY'S BLUFF—BLOWING UP OF THE "MERRIMAC"—COMMODORE TATTNALL'S REPORT—REFLECTIONS ON THE DESTRUCTION OF THIS SHIP—PILOTS.

WE now knew something of the *Monitor's* construction, and it was determined that in the next engagement she should be boarded, and an attempt made to wedge the turret with iron wedges, to throw hand-grenades down the turret, and to cover her hatchways and ventilators in the hope of smothering out her crew. In order that the attempt should have every chance for success four gunboats, of which the *Beaufort* was one, were designated for it. Each vessel had her crew divided into the proper number of parties so that if even one got alongside, every point considered would receive proper attention. At a meeting of the captains the night before going down, it was resolved that in the case of a vessel's being sunk in trying to board, the others should not stop to pick up the survivors. Lieutenant Commanding J. H. Rochelle commanded one of these gunboats, and Lieutenant Commanding Hunter Davidson another—the other captain I cannot recall, unless it was Alexander of the *Raleigh*.

On the 11th of April, a little over a month after our first engagement, the squadron, consisting of the *Merrimac*, *Patrick*