

CHAPTER XXVI.

AM ORDERED TO COMMAND THE GUNBOAT "DRURY"—THE JAMES RIVER SQUADRON—THE SEVEN DAYS' FIGHTING AROUND RICHMOND—A BOARD FOR THE EXAMINATION OF MIDSHIPMEN—AM ORDERED TO THE IRON-CLAD "PALMETTO STATE" AT CHARLESTON—DESCRIPTION OF HER—AN INCIDENT—A FIRE AT SEA—FLAG OFFICER DUNCAN L. INGRAHAM—BATTLE OFF CHARLESTON, JANUARY 31, 1863, BETWEEN THE CONFEDERATE IRON-CLADS AND THE FEDERAL FLEET—SURRENDER OF THE "MERCEDITA" AND "KEYSTONE STATE"—THE OTHER VESSELS DRIVEN OFF—PROCLAMATION OF GENERAL BEAUREGARD AND COMMODORE INGRAHAM—REMARKS UPON THIS ENGAGEMENT AND ITS RESULTS.

UPON my arrival in Richmond, May 15, 1862, I was placed in command of the gunboat *Drury*, then on the James river. She was a kind of an iron-clad, with no steam-power. She mounted one large rifle gun forward, protected by an iron shield in the form of a V. She was intended to fight bows on, and was fitted up very hastily to assist in the defence of Drury's Bluff, in the case of another attack by water. Her engines were put in a few months afterwards and the shield removed.

The river had been obstructed abreast of Drury's Bluff by sinking vessels, and cages loaded with stone. Among the vessels sunk was the steamer *Jamestown*, whose crew, under the brave Barney, had rendered such good service at the bluff on the 15th. The squadron at this time was commanded by Commodore French Forrest, and consisted of the *Richmond* (iron-clad), *Patrick Henry*, *Nansemond*, *Hampton*, *Beaufort*, *Raleigh* and *Drury*. The *Richmond* was just completed, and was a fine vessel built on the plan of the *Merrimac*. She was not so large, and her ends were not submerged. She carried a bow and stern pivot, and two guns in broadside. Drury's Bluff was strongly fortified, and garrisoned by marines

under Captain Sims. The post was commanded by Captain Sidney Smith Lee, an elder brother of General Robert E. Lee. A few miles lower down, on the left bank of the river, at Chapin's Bluff, was another heavy battery commanded by Captain T. J. Page of the navy.

The enemy, under General McClellan, was advancing up the peninsula to attack Richmond; and the Confederacy was assembling all the troops possible to defend it. On the 31st of May was fought the indecisive battle of Seven Pines, or Fair Oaks as the Federals called it; and on the 25th of June the Confederates, under General Lee, made their first attack on General McClellan's forces at Mechanicsville. This was the beginning of the seven days' fighting around Richmond, which resulted in General McClellan's army being driven to Harrison's Landing, on the James river, and relieved Richmond from all danger. Shortly after these battles, General Lee advanced in the direction of Maryland, and the Federal troops were called to the defence of their own capital.

Mr. Mallory, our Secretary of the Navy, ordered a Board for the examination and classification of the midshipmen in the Navy, and I was detailed as a member of it. Commodore George N. Hollins was the president, and the other members of it were Captains C. McBlair and Thorburn and Lieutenant Myers. We sat at first in Richmond for the examination of the midshipmen serving in the James river squadron and the different batteries, and then went to Charleston, Savannah and Mobile. We returned to Richmond and finished up our work. This Board did good work both for the Navy and the midshipmen. The secretary promoted all those who passed to the grade of passed midshipman, and it would have been better if some of these young gentlemen had been at once promoted to be lieutenants instead of those who were taken from civil life, and who did not know a ship when they saw one. While in Charleston on this duty I noticed two iron-clads building, which struck me favorably; and my friend John Rutledge telling me he was to have the command of one of them, I

offered to give up my command on the James river and go with him as his executive officer. I did this as I saw there would be no fighting on the James river for some time to come, and I thought there was an opportunity to strike a blow at Charleston. There were then no iron-clads off that harbor. Rutledge held me to my word, and in the fall of 1862 I was detached from the *Drury* and ordered to report to Flag Officer Duncan L. Ingraham, at Charleston, for duty as executive officer of the iron-clad *Palmetto State*, Captain John Rutledge. The *Chicora*, her sister ship, was commanded by my comrade Captain John R. Tucker.

The *Palmetto State* was an iron-clad on the plan of the *Merrimac*, except that her ends were not submerged, and her side plating was turned down at the water's edge, making what we called a *knuckle*, and very strong. I think her plating was of four and a half inches of iron. Her roof, or upper deck, and her ends outside the shield were covered on top with two inches of iron, and her hatchways were covered with heavy iron gratings. Her pilot house, which was heavily armored, was abaft the smoke stack. Her armament consisted of an 80-pounder Brooke rifle gun forward, a 60-pounder rifle gun aft, and two 8-inch shell guns in broadside—four guns in all. Her engines always worked well, and under favorable circumstances she would go seven knots per hour, though her average speed was about six. She drew fourteen feet of water, and worked and steered well. The *Chicora* was similar in all respects, except that she had but 4-inch iron, I think. These two vessels were built at private ship-yards in Charleston, and great rivalry existed between them as to which should turn out the best ship. Both were well-built, creditable vessels. All their arrangements were good, magazines, shell-rooms, quarters, etc., all admirably arranged.

When these two vessels had been in commission a short time, they were fine specimens of men-of-war and would have done credit to any navy. They were well officered and

manned. Their drill at both great guns and small arms was excellent, and the discipline perfect. They were the cleanest iron-clads, I believe, that ever floated, and the men took great pride in keeping them so. Their fire drill was good, as I have reason to remember, for the *Palmetto State* caught fire one morning in the fore-hold, adjoining the magazine. I was dressing at the time, when I heard a running about, and immediately became conscious that "something was the matter." I hurried on my coat, and just then heard the cry: "There's fire in the magazine!" Thinks I to myself, "if that be the case we will very soon hear of it," as Lord Howe once said under similar circumstances. I sprang up on the deck and had the fire-bell rung, and every man and officer went promptly to his station. The fire-party went below, and discovered the place of fire, and in fifteen minutes it was suppressed.

Speaking of a fire so near the magazine, I was some years after this placed in a situation so very peculiar, that I may be pardoned for introducing it here. I doubt if ever a man found himself in the same situation: After the war I entered the service of the Pacific Mail Steamship Company, and for six years commanded one of their steamers running between San Francisco and Panama. July 1st, 1873, I left Panama for San Francisco in the steamship *Montana*, with about fifty cabin and four hundred steerage passengers, and a large freight. All went well until the evening of the seventh day, when I found myself 130 miles from Acapulco, Mexico, which place I expected to reach the next morning at 8. It was a dark night and raining at intervals, but there was not much wind. The ship was well clear of the Tartar Shoal and there was nothing to cause any uneasiness. I remained up, as was my custom, until midnight, and then gave the second mate, who had the mid-watch, the written orders for the night. I turned in, and was soon asleep. I was awakened by the officer of the deck calling me. Upon my replying, he said in a calm manner: "Captain Parker, the ship is on fire." "What time is it?" I asked "Twenty minutes past three," he replied. I then asked

where the ship was on fire, and he told me it was in the forward store-room, where I knew the oils and paints were kept. He asked if he should ring the fire-bell, but I told him no; I thought we might extinguish it without letting the passengers know anything about it. All this time I was rapidly dressing, as may well be imagined, and in a minute from the time I was called I was out on deck. As soon as I reached it I saw the smoke coming up the fore-hatch, and the steerage passengers rushing up in great alarm. I ordered the fire-bell rung, stopped the engine, and turned the ship so as to bring the wind aft. The men were well drilled and soon every man was at his station. The steerage passengers were all sent aft on the hurricane deck, and made to sit down flat on deck; officers were placed over them and they remained quietly so until the fire was extinguished. The cabin passengers remained in the saloon in charge of the purser and doctor. We soon had eight good streams of water forward, and I scuttled the deck in several places over the store-room, and put the pipes down. Two or three pipes were turned down the open hatchway, but the fumes arising from the burning paints were so stifling that the men could not remain more than a few minutes at a time. There was no flinching on their part, however,—quite the contrary; as soon as a man was hauled up, half-suffocated, others were eager to take his place. After working some fifteen minutes in this way, seeing that the flames were apparently getting the advantage of us, and knowing that if the hurricane deck caught fire we would burn up very rapidly, I sent for the second mate and boatswain and directed them to lower the boats near the water's edge, but to allow no one to get into them. We carried about one hundred pounds of powder in a copper tank, in the magazine, which was just under the store-room. It could be filled with water by turning a cock. Sending for the first officer I told him to drown the magazine. He replied in a low tone, that it was useless to do so, as the powder had not been returned to the magazine, but was in the store-room.

"Do you mean to say," said I, "*that it is in the fire?*" "Yes, sir," said he, "it is."

I reflected. If it became known that the powder was in the store-room there would be a stampede; if, on the other hand, it exploded and blew the bows of the ship out, there would necessarily be great loss of life. I stuck to my original resolution to put the fire out. I had always impressed it upon my crew that if my ship caught fire, it must be put out. I had no faith in the custom of putting on all steam and heading for the shore. I knew that that of itself caused a panic; that, moreover, the fire was fanned up and swept aft, endangering the lives of the cabin passengers; and that the boats could not be lowered with the ship running at full speed. My idea was that if the passengers had to be put in the boats, it could be better done eight miles from the shore than in the breakers after the ship grounded.

So I spoke but a few words to my men now. I said, "We are men enough to handle this fire, and we *must* do it." They wanted no encouragement, and at the end of an hour we had it under. As soon as a man could breathe in the store-room, the powder-tank was passed up to me. It was so hot you could not put your bare hand upon it. My first impulse was to order the mate to throw it overboard; but I thought for a moment, and then directed him to put it in his state-room. I knew it would not explode then, and as we had gotten so well out of the scrape, determined to take the matter coolly. The steerage passengers were now sent forward again, given a cup of coffee, and advised to turn in for a morning nap. We started the engine ahead at 5 o'clock, and at 9 made fast to our buoy at Acapulco. We poured an immense quantity of water into the ship during the fire, but as we kept the donkey-engine at work pumping it out as it ran aft, our cargo was not damaged.

On this occasion I had a Chinese crew, with a Chinese boatswain. The leading men, quarter-masters and firemen were white, and they showed the others the example. It shows what

effect that will have,—for the Chinese were the only ones engaged in putting out the fire who knew the powder was in the store-room. Yet they stuck to their posts. The first officer, whose duty it was to see that the powder was kept in the magazine, had been very negligent of his duty. He would have been dismissed the service had it not been for his courageous conduct during the fire. I reported to the agent, that although he had neglected his duty in the case—probably through forgetfulness—yet he had exhibited during the fire the highest traits of an officer, and I thought he should be retained. As for the conduct of the passengers, I never knew which deserved the most credit—they or my crew. The cause of the fire was spontaneous combustion, probably from oiled rags in the paint-room.

To return to the *Palmetto State*. One drill I introduced on board her, to which I attached much importance. Every officer and man had his appointed port or hatch to escape by in case of the vessel's suddenly sinking—say by the explosion of a torpedo. The first men who reached the deck immediately took off the iron gratings, without waiting to be told. At the order, "clear the ship," all hands would assemble on the roof in less than a minute. We never went to general quarters that I did not try this; and as I say, in less than a minute, the men from the magazine, shell-room, fire-room, everywhere, would be out on deck. There were a good many sailor-men in our crew, and we managed to put them in uniform and keep them provided with clothing. Occasionally we got a man from the army,—and we kept a bathing arrangement on the wharf, where all recruits were bathed and their clothes well boiled before being allowed to come on board, for obvious reasons. Both vessels were painted a pale blue or bluish-grey, the blockade runners having demonstrated that it was the most difficult to be distinguished. Before going into action we greased the shield with slush, as the *Merrimac* had done at Hampton Roads. Our officers in the *Palmetto State* were: Captain John Rutledge; Lieutenants Parker, Porcher, Shryock

and Bowen; Surgeon Lynah; Paymaster Banks; Engineer Campbell; Master Chew; Midshipmen Cary, Sevier and Hamilton. We had a good boatswain and gunner, and a crew of about 120 men.

The *Palmetto State* bore the flag of Commodore Duncan L. Ingraham, who commanded the station. He was known as the hero of the Koszta affair. Koszta was a Hungarian refugee, who, when in the United States in 1850, had declared his intention of becoming an American citizen, and went through the preliminary forms. June 21, 1853, being in Smyrna, he was seized by a boat's crew from the Austrian brig *Huzzar*. Captain Ingraham, who was present in the sloop-of-war *St. Louis*, of 20 guns, demanded his release by a certain time, and prepared to attack the *Huzzar* on the 2nd of July. Koszta was then given up, and he afterwards returned to the United States. Captain Ingraham was much commended by his Government for his prompt and decisive action. He entered the U. S. Navy in 1812, being then but nine years of age. He served in the frigate *Congress*, under Captain Smith. He told me that they were at sea 9 months without going into port. They made a few prizes, but were not fortunate enough to fall in with any of the British frigates. It was considered an unlucky cruise, and the *Congress* got the name of being an unlucky ship. Commodore Ingraham commanded the brig *Somers* until just before the war with Mexico. During the war he served for a time on Commodore Conner's Staff. He was a delicate-looking man, of intelligence and culture, and bore the reputation of being a brave and good officer. He is still living.

By January, 1863, the vessels being all ready, we commenced to think of making some demonstration, and it was decided to attack the fleet off Charleston on the night of the 30th. The enemy's fleet off the harbor on that night consisted of the *Housatonic*, *Mercedita*, *Keystone State*, *Quaker City*, *Augusta*, *Flag*, *Memphis*, *Stettin*, *Ottawa* and *Unadilla*. Of these, the *Housatonic*, *Ottawa* and *Unadilla* were, I think, the

only regularly-built men-of-war; the others being converted merchant steamers,—some paddles, the others screws. Captain Taylor, of the *Housatonic*, was the senior officer of the blockading force. Admiral Dupont, who commanded the station, was at this time at Port Royal with the iron-clad *New Ironsides*, the frigate *Wabash* and the steamships *Susquehanna*, *Canandaigua* and some others.

About 10 P. M., January 30th, Commodore Ingraham came on board the *Palmetto State*, and at 11.30 the two vessels quietly cast off their fasts and got underweigh. There was no demonstration on shore, and I believe few of the citizens knew of the projected attack. Charleston was full of spies at this time, and everything was carried to the enemy. It was nearly calm, and a bright moonlight night,—the moon being 11 days old. We went down very slowly, wishing to reach the bar of the main ship channel, 11 miles from Charleston, about 4 in the morning, when it would be high water there. Commander Hartstene (an Arctic man who rescued Kane and his companions), was to have followed us with several unarmed steamers and 50 soldiers to take possession of the prizes; but, for some reason they did not cross the bar. We steamed slowly down the harbor and, knowing we had a long night before us, I ordered the hammocks piped down. The men declined to take them, and I found they had gotten up an impromptu Ethiopian entertainment. As there was no necessity for preserving quiet at this time the captain let them enjoy themselves in their own way. No men ever exhibited a better spirit before going into action; and the short, manly speech of our captain convinced us that we were to be well commanded under any circumstances. We passed between Forts Sumter and Moultrie—the former with its yellow sides looming up and reflecting the moon's rays—and turned down the channel along Morris Island. I presume all hands were up in the forts and batteries watching us, but no word was spoken. After midnight the men began to drop off by twos and threes, and in a short time the silence of death prevailed.

I was much impressed with the appearance of the ship at this time. Visiting the lower deck, forward, I found it covered with men sleeping in their pea-jackets peacefully and calmly; on the gun-deck a few of the more thoughtful seamen were pacing quietly to and fro, with folded arms; in the pilot-house stood the Commodore and Captain, with the two pilots; the midshipmen were quiet in their quarters (for a wonder), and aft I found the lieutenants smoking their pipes, but not conversing. In the ward-room the surgeon was preparing his instruments on the large mess-table; and the paymaster was, as he told me, "lending him a hand."

As we approached the bar, about 4 A. M., we saw the steamer *Mercedita* lying at anchor a short distance outside it. I had no fear of her seeing our hull; but we were burning soft coal, and the night being very clear, with nearly a full moon, it did seem to me that our smoke, which trailed after us like a huge black serpent, *must* be visible several miles off. We went silently to quarters, and our main-deck then presented a scene that will always live in my memory. We went to quarters an hour before crossing the bar, and the men stood silently at their guns. The port-shutters were closed, not a light could be seen from the outside, and the few battle-lanterns lit cast a pale, wierd light on the gun-deck. My friend Phil. Porcher, who commanded the bow-gun, was equipped with a pair of white kid gloves, and had in his mouth an unlighted cigar. As we stood at our stations, not even whispering, the silence became more and more intense. Just at my side I noticed the little powder-boy of the broadside guns sitting on a match-tub, with his powder-pouch slung over his shoulder, fast asleep, and he was in this condition when we rammed the *Mercedita*. We crossed the bar and steered directly for the *Mercedita*. They did not see us until we were very near. Her captain then hailed us, and ordered us to keep off or he would fire. We did not reply, and he called out, "You will be into me." Just then we struck him on the starboard quarter, and dropping the forward port-shutter, fired the bow gun. The shell from