

## CHAPTER XXVII.

CAPTURE OF THE U. S. S. "ISAAC SMITH"—TORPEDOES—CHARLESTON AT THIS TIME—ITS DEFENCES—BLOCKADE RUNNERS—ARRIVAL OF THE U. S. IRON-CLAD FLEET OFF THE HARBOR—ATTACK ON FORT SUMTER BY ADMIRAL DUPONT'S FLEET, APRIL 7TH, 1863—RESULT OF THE ATTACK—THE "KEOKUK" SUNK—ADMIRAL DUPONT'S CAPTAINS—AN INTENDED TORPEDO EXPEDITION—THE MONITORS LEAVE MORRIS ISLAND AND GO TO THE NORTH EDISTO RIVER.

THE day before we attacked the vessels off the harbor (January 30th) the U. S. steamer *Isaac Smith* was captured on the Stono river by the light batteries of the army. She was turned over to the navy and put in commission under the name of the *Stono*. Captain Hartstene was placed in command of her. She was a vessel of 450 tons, and had originally been a "cattle" boat on the North river. She was propelled by a screw with a walking-beam engine; the walking-beam worked athwartship which gave her a very peculiar appearance. She carried a very heavy battery for a vessel of her size and construction; eight or ten 64-pounder shell guns in broadside and a rifle 30-pounder Parrot forward. We found her very useful. Immediately after the battle of the 31st the fleet off Charleston was reinforced by the U. S. steamer *New Ironsides*—a heavily-armed frigate with a powerful battery. It was not considered advisable to send our vessels out to attack her. During the months of February and March we remained in a state of comparative inactivity; but kept our men in perfect drill. We put a torpedo on our bow at this time. The staff projected some 20 feet from the stem; it worked on a hinge or gooseneck, and by means of an iron davit the staff could be raised so as to carry the torpedo out of water—when ready for use it was lowered so as to bring the torpedo about six feet under

water. The torpedo was loaded with 60 pounds of rifle powder, and had screwed in it in different positions near the head seven sensitive chemical fuses. We kept it in the water ready for use, and about every two weeks would bring it on board, take out the fuses and examine the powder to see that it was dry. As executive officer I always attended to this with the gunner, and it was no joke to do it. In the first place we had to go out in a boat and take the torpedo off the staff, and in rough weather it was hard to keep the boat from striking it. As a moderate blow was sufficient to break the glass phials inside the fuses and cause an explosion, this in itself was not a pleasant occupation. Upon getting it on board we would take it on the after "fantail," (as we denominated the ends outside the shield) behind a screen, and I have passed many a *mauvais quart d'heure* while the gunner unscrewed with a wrench, and took out, all the fuses. I think it was about the most unpleasant duty I ever had to perform.

Charleston was very gay about this time; parties and picnics were the order of the day, and all seemed inclined to follow the advice of the old poet who has written:

"Gather ye rose-buds while ye may,  
Old time is still a-flying;  
And this same flower that smiles to-day  
To-morrow will be dying."

General Beauregard was in command of the department, and General Ripley second in command. They were constantly engaged in strengthening the batteries, laying down torpedoes, and placing obstructions. I never knew much about the obstructions. There were some booms abreast of Fort Sumter with an opening close in to the fort, and piling abreast of Castle Pinckney; but I do not remember much about the obstructions or the torpedoes. Every now and then we would be cautioned in a public order against using certain channels; but I suspect much of this information was for the benefit of spies.

There was no doubt, though, about the strength of the

different forts and batteries. They mounted very heavy guns, and were remarkably well manned. From personal inspection I can speak of the garrison of Fort Sumter. The regiment there, under the command of Colonel Rhett, bore more the appearance of "regulars" than any regiment I remember to have seen at the South.

We were enlivened by the occasional arrival of a blockade runner. They generally flew the British flag. One morning a steamer called the *Ariel* arrived, flying the Spanish flag, rather to our surprise. It seems she had intended going into Wilmington, but losing her reckoning, found herself off "a harbor," and was forced to run in or be captured. The captain did not know whether he was in Wilmington or not until he was told. She had a Spanish captain, and a drunken Englishman for a navigator. She took on board a cargo of cotton and as might have been expected was captured the night she went out. This vessel was schooner-rigged, and her masts worked on hinges at the spar-deck so that they could be lowered by swinging them back.

In March, 1863, Flag Officer Ingraham was relieved by Commodore Tucker, who assumed command of the vessels afloat, with his flag on board the *Chicora*; Commodore Ingraham retaining command of the station.

The Federals were now assembling a large number of monitors at Port Royal and the North Edisto river, and we knew that Charleston would soon be attacked by sea. The original *Monitor* foundered off Cape Hatteras on her way south, December 30, 1862. This class of iron-clads came to be called "monitors" from her name. Although we knew the monitors were now assembling at the North Edisto river, not many miles below Charleston, yet their appearance off the bar took us rather by surprise after all. It was on Sunday, April 5th, that as I was quietly smoking a cigar after the usual "muster" and "inspection," Lieutenant Macomb Mason—Commodore Tucker's flag lieutenant—came on board with the information that the iron-clad fleet was off the harbor. Our

vessels were lying at their wharves at the time; but we immediately got underweigh and proceeded to our previously assigned stations off Fort Johnson. We were held as part of the inner circle of defence. I suppose one reason we did not go further out was that the Federals might not know there was an opening in the obstructions off Fort Sumter. The monitors and frigate *New Ironsides* crossed the bar on the 6th, and anchored off Morris island. That very night a blockade runner came in by the main ship channel and passed by them without being perceived. The captain of the blockade runner took them to be Confederate vessels, as they were at anchor inside the bar.

The U. S. iron-clad squadron consisted of the frigate *New Ironsides*, bearing the flag of Admiral Dupont, and the monitors *Passaic*, *Weehawken*, *Montauk*, *Patapsco*, *Catskill*, *Nantucket*, *Nahant* and *Keokuk*. The monitors were armed with one 15-in. and one 11-inch gun each, with the exception of the *Keokuk*, which I believe had two 11-in. guns. The *New Ironsides* mounted two 150-pounder Parrott rifle guns, and fourteen 11-in. Dahlgren guns in broadside on her main deck, or casemate. She had on her spar-deck two 50-pounder Dahlgren rifle guns. There were also present a large number of wooden vessels of war, but they took no part in the subsequent engagement.

It was about 1 P. M. on the 7th of April, 1863, that we perceived the enemy to be underweigh, and advancing to the attack. Fort Sumter hoisted the Confederate and Palmetto flags, and the band, stationed on the parapet, played several patriotic airs. Our two vessels got underweigh and steamed slowly around in a circle during the entire bombardment. The monitors came up with the *Weehawken* in advance. She carried some kind of a false bow, designed by Ericson, to pick up torpedoes. The *New Ironsides* was in the centre of the line; but becoming unmanageable, the rear vessels were directed to pass her. She remained during the action about twelve hundred yards from Fort Sumter. The monitors

fought at distances varying from five hundred to seven hundred yards. At 2.50 P. M. the first gun was fired from Fort Moultrie, and soon after Sumter opened, with Fort Beauregard and other batteries on Sullivan's and Morris islands.

It was the intention of Admiral Dupont to pass Fort Sumter, and attack its northwest face; but the leading monitor coming up to the obstruction and not liking the look of it, turned around. This threw their line into some confusion, but they kept up the fire on the northeast face and were under a terrific fire from Sumter. As the enemy did not pass the obstruction we had no opportunity of trying the effect of the torpedo on our bow, nor could we fire a gun. I do not know the number of guns our forts and batteries brought to play on the monitors, but it was very large, and I suppose no vessels were ever under so heavy a fire.

At 4.30 P. M. Admiral Dupont made the signal to his vessels to retire, and shortly after they withdrew to their former anchorage off Morris island. They were still inside the bar. We did not know, of course, what injuries his vessels had received in the encounter, and were inclined to consider the movement as a *reconnaissance* in force. In fact Admiral Dupont says in his report to the Secretary of the Navy:

"Finding no impression made upon the fort, I made signal to withdraw the ships, intending to renew the attack this morning." [April 8.]

"But the commanders of the monitors came on board and reported, verbally, the injuries to their vessels; when without hesitation or consultation, (for I never hold councils of war), I determined not to renew the attack; for in my judgment it would have converted a failure into a disaster; and I will only add that Charleston cannot be taken by a purely naval attack, and the army could give me no co-operation. Had I succeeded in entering the harbor I should have had twelve hundred men and thirty-two guns; but five of the eight iron-clads were wholly or partially disabled after a brief engagement."

The next morning we observed that the *Keokuk* had sunk at her anchors, or while in tow of another vessel. She was not a regular monitor, but was constructed after a plan of Mr. Whitney of New York. Captain Rhind was ordered to give her a "good trial under fire," and he did! The captains of all the monitors did their duty manfully and gallantly. They were: Percival Drayton, John Rodgers, John L. Worden, Daniel Ammen, George W. Rodgers, D. McN. Fairfax, John Downes, and A. C. Rhind. Captain Thomas Turner commanded the *Ironsides*, and C. R. P. Rodgers was the fleet captain. Of this latter officer, Admiral Dupont says in his report: "No language could overstate his services to his country, to this fleet, and to myself as its Commander-in-chief." Certainly no commander, not even Nelson, was ever better supported by his captains than was Admiral Dupont. They concurred with him in the opinion that it was better not to make another attempt.

In this engagement the enemy fired at Forts Sumter and Moultrie 139 shots from 11-inch and 15-inch guns; of these—96 shell, 30 solid shot, and 13 coned shot. The *Keokuk* fired but three times. Captain George E. Belknap U. S. N. in a letter to the United Service Magazine, says: "The Confederates fired in this engagement two thousand two hundred and nine shot, shell, and rifle-balls of heavy calibre."

The Federal loss was one killed and a few wounded. On our side the casualties were: One man killed and five wounded in Fort Sumter; and one killed at Moultrie.

Fort Sumter was not materially damaged. Some casemates were battered in, and a brick traverse knocked down. The damages were immediately repaired with sand-bags. It was said in Charleston at the time, that in this action the *New Ironsides* was anchored over a torpedo containing 1200 pounds of powder, and that the electrician could not explode it. It was made of an iron boiler or tank, and was supposed to have leaked. I cannot vouch for this, but I think it was true.

The failure of Admiral Dupont to take Charleston by a

*coup de main* gave great offence to the authorities at Washington. Not knowing anything about the difficulties in the way, they expected him to repeat Admiral Farragut's performance at New Orleans. The Secretary of the Navy in his report for 1863 says in reference to this affair: "But comparatively slight injury was sustained by the turreted vessels, and only one life was lost in this remarkable contest." It resulted in Admiral Dupont being relieved, at his own request, on the 6th of July by Admiral John A. Dahlgren; and whether he was correct or not in the opinion that the vessels could not have passed Fort Sumter on the 7th of April and taken Charleston, certain it is that they never did so afterward! Fort Sumter, though finally battered to a heap of ruins, was never captured. It was evacuated, with the city, in February 1865.

Some weeks before this attack upon Fort Sumter Lieutenant Webb came to Charleston with orders from the Secretary of the Navy to organize a fleet of small torpedo boats—the idea being that they were to attack the monitors in case they should succeed in entering the harbor. It seems that a board of officers had been assembled in Richmond to devise plans of action in such an event. An old and distinguished commodore proposed that they should have hawsers with large hooks in the ends laid along the streets. "Then," said this old sea-dog, "let a boat go out, hook on to a monitor, clap on two or three hundred soldiers, and haul her, by G—d, right into the wharf. "But commodore," said one, "she would fire her gun and rake down the entire party!" "By G—d, I never thought of that," he replied. Webb had great difficulty in finding boats; but finally succeeded in collecting a lot of skiffs and canoes with a few serviceable cutters. These boats were fitted with poles 20 feet long on their stems, with 60 pound torpedoes on their ends. Webb had some thirty officers and men, and he hired a warehouse for their accommodation and a depot for the torpedoes. It was not at all uncommon to see a sailor rolling down to his boat, when they were called for exercise, with a quid of tobacco in his cheek and a 60 pound torpedo slung over his back; and

when it is recollected that these torpedoes had seven sensitive fuses which a tap with a stick or a blow with a stone was sufficient to explode and blow half the street down, it can readily be believed that we gave him a wide berth.

When the monitors appeared off the harbor on the 5th a detachment of sailors was sent on from Wilmington under my old friend Johnson. They were assigned to the torpedo boats under Webb, and never having had anything to do with torpedoes had much to learn. The iron-clads remained at anchor off Morris island, and we were expecting another and perhaps more desperate attack. On the morning of the 10th a signal was made by the flag ship *Chicora* requiring me to repair on board. Upon getting alongside I found Commodore Tucker pacing the "fantail," and I joined him. "What," said he, "is your opinion as to making an attack on the three upper monitors to-night with six torpedo boats?" "I think well of it," I answered. "Will you take the command of them," said the commodore. "Yes, sir," I replied, and the thing was settled. He gave me an order on Webb for the boats which I was to select, and the attempt was to be made that night. Now I had never had any fancy for this kind of service; in fact it was repugnant to me; but this was a case of *noblesse oblige*. I went immediately to work to get everything ready. I went on shore and selected six pretty good cutters with their officers and crews, and after directing them to come out singly I returned to the *Chicora* where I had the use of the cabin to draw up my plan of attack, &c. While about it, Webb came off and said General Beauregard thought it would be better to take all the torpedo boats and attack the entire fleet of monitors.

Commodore Tucker called a council of war, and submitted the proposal. It was decided that it should be attempted; and as the council broke up, the commodore directed me to retain the command. The boats were ordered to come off singly, or in pairs, so as not to attract the attention of the enemy; and to rendezvous alongside the *Stono*. This vessel had a large cabin, and I used it to collect the commanders together so

that I might explain my method of attack, once for all. It was growing towards sunset, and time was pressing. I intended to drop down with the ebb tide, close along Morris island, and to attack the monitors at the beginning of the flood tide, which would be about midnight; and my written orders required that every commander should explode his torpedo against one of the enemy's ships before returning to Charleston. We intended to "double bank" the monitors. The moon was 23 days old, and would not rise until about 1 A. M.

We had about fifteen boats in all; and as I looked at them lying alongside the *Stono*, some of them half full of water, and with inexperienced crews, my heart sank. I could see no possible chance of success under the circumstances. After explaining my plan of attack, I broke up the conference and directed the captains to have their boats ready to move as soon as it became dark. My old friend Johnson came to me for further instructions. He had never seen a torpedo-boat, and had some doubts in relation to them. "It seems to me, captain," he said, "that when I explode the torpedo, the reaction will knock the bow of my boat in." This, to tell the truth, was *my* private opinion also; but of course I could not express it. I tried to explain to him why it might not happen. "Well," he said, "I'll explode my torpedo against a monitor; but that's the way it looks to me!" I shall never forget his earnest expression at the time, and I felt sure that whatever his "doubts" might be, I could rely upon him to the death.

When nearly ready to start, the officer of the deck reported to me that Commodore Tucker was coming on board. I thought he had come to bid us Godspeed; but he said as soon as he reached the deck: "Parker, you have lost your chance—the monitors are leaving—they can be seen crossing the bar." I thought for a moment, and then replied: "I am glad of it." "Why!" said the commodore, much surprised. For answer I took him to the side of the vessel and pointed to the

group of half-swamped canoes and skiffs! Why the *Stono* was not blown up, or why they did not blow each other up, is more than I can account for. The commodore agreed with me that it would have been a forlorn hope. We had not known when it was decided to send the boats down how entirely unfitted they were for the service.

I think it was on the 12th that the last of the monitors left the offing; and soon after we heard of their arrival in the North Edisto river. The *New Ironsides* remained on the blockade.