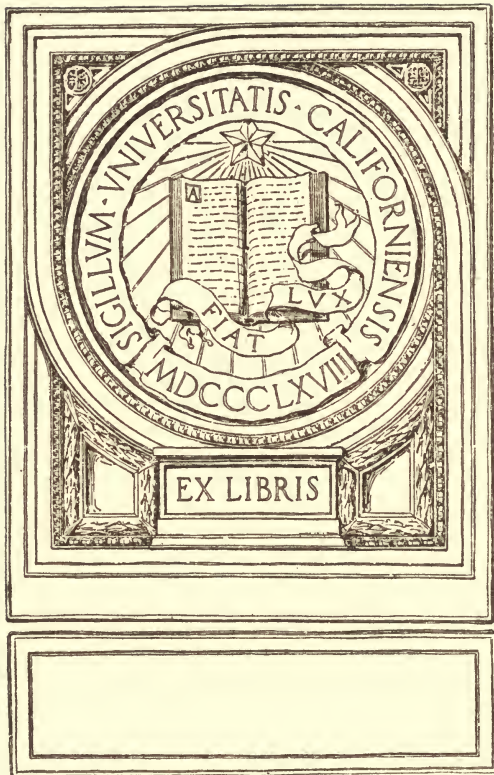


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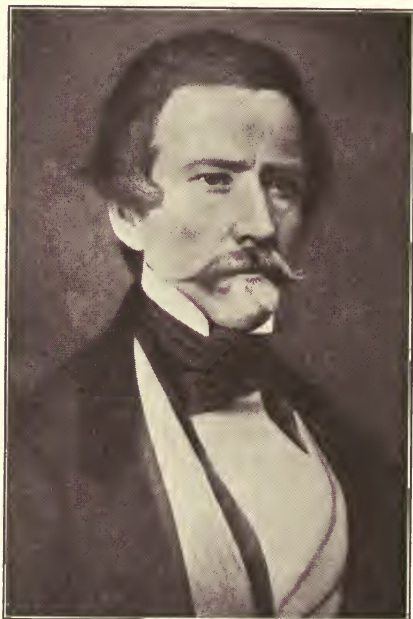
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Raphael Semmes.



AMERICAN CRISIS BIOGRAPHIES

RAPHAEL SEMMES

by

COLYER MERIWETHER

Author of

"History of Higher Education in South Carolina," etc.



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## CHRONOLOGY

- 1809—September 27th, born in Charles County, Md.  
1826—April 1st, appointed midshipman.  
1832—January 31st, ordered to examination.  
1832—June 1st, warranted passed midshipman.  
1833—March 22d, appointed in charge of chronometers.  
1835—July 25th, sent to *Constellation* as acting master.  
1837—February 9th, promoted to Lieutenant.  
1837—May 5th, married Anne Elizabeth Spencer.  
1838—July 30th, sent to Norfolk Navy Yard.  
1841—May 17th, transferred to Pensacola Navy Yard.  
1843—August 10th, commands *Poinsett*.  
1845—September 9th, assigned to home squadron.  
1846—December 8th, loss of *Somers*.  
1848—January 28th, commands *Electra*.  
1849—October 12th, detached to await orders.  
1855—September 14th, promoted to commander.  
1856—November 26th, lighthouse inspector.  
1858—September 24th, secretary of lighthouse board.  
1861—February 11th, member of lighthouse board.  
1861—February 15th, resignation from navy accepted.  
1861—June 3d, commissions *Sumter*.  
1861—June 30th, escapes to the high seas.  
1861—July 3d, makes first capture, *Golden Rocket*.  
1861—November 23d, escapes from St. Pierre harbor.

- 1862—January 18th, reaches Gibraltar on *Sumter*.  
1862—April 11th, turns over *Sumter* to midshipman.  
1862—August 24th, commissions *Alabama*.  
1862—September 5th, *Alabama's* first capture.  
1862—November 18th, *Alabama* enters her first port.  
1863—January 11th, sinks the *Hatteras*.  
1863—June 20th, commissions tender, *Tuscaloosa*.  
1863—August 5th, arrives at Cape Town.  
1863—November 18th, arrives at Souriton.  
1863—December 21st, arrives at Singapore.  
1864—March 20th, again arrives at Cape Town.  
1864—June 11th, arrives at Cherbourg.  
1864—June 19th, *Alabama* sunk by *Kearsarge*.  
1864—October 3d, embarks for America.  
1865—January 2d, leaves Mobile for Richmond.  
1865—February 10th, notified of appointment as Rear Admiral.  
1865—February 18th, assumes command James River Fleet.  
1865—April 2d, ordered to retreat with Lee.  
1865—May 1st, paroled in North Carolina.  
1865—December 15th, arrested in Mobile.  
1866—April 6th, released in Washington.  
1866—October 24th, appointed to Louisiana State Seminary.  
1867—June 18th, resigns from Louisiana State Seminary.  
1869—Publishes book on *Sumter* and *Alabama*.  
1877—August 30th, died in Mobile.  
1900—June 27th, his monument unveiled in Mobile.  
1909—September 27th, celebration of the centennial of his birth.



# RAPHAEL SEMMES

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## CHAPTER I

### EARLY LIFE AND EDUCATION

AT an awful crisis in the history of a great land, at a fateful turn in the path of humanity's progress, Raphael Semmes looms up as a portentous figure. He was chief among those few daring spirits from the South that swept the United States merchant flag from the ocean, and he was the leader on his side in that contest on the waters that was the culmination in the transition of the navies of the nations from sail to steam. He was preëminent in proving what havoc could be wrought among the ships of peace through the supplementary aid of Watt's invention. There had been gallant cruisers before him, as bold and as resourceful, but none single-handed had ever accomplished such wondrous results, and his career has never been equaled since his time, and perhaps can never be duplicated in this period

of air craft and wireless telegraphy. He did his momentous work in three years, but the character that guided the destiny of the event, and the mind that moulded the means to an end, can be fairly seen only through the study of his days. Through the data provided by the capable hands of members of his family, we learn of his ancestry and boyhood ; through his own pen, through that of others, and through official records, we know of his subsequent career.

Raphael Semmes, of French-American descent, and of Catholic family, was born in Charles County, Maryland, on September 27, 1809, just seven months and two weeks after the birth of Abraham Lincoln, the most towering personality in that same titanic upheaval in which Semmes won his fame. The father of Raphael Semmes was Richard Thompson Semmes, according to the best authority "fifth in descent from the first American ancestor, Benedict Joseph Semmes, of Normandy, France, who came over with Lord Baltimore in 1640," in the *Ark and Dove*. Raphael's "mother was Catherine Hooe Middleton, a descendant of Arthur Middleton, one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence." There was only one other child of this union, Samuel Middleton Semmes, who afterward be-

came a well-known lawyer in Cumberland, Maryland, and it was in the office of this brother that Raphael read law and began that legal training that was to be of such service to him in his numerous international verbal battles at the various ports he visited with the *Sumter* and *Alabama*. The mother died early, and the father passed away when Raphael was only ten years old, leaving the two boys almost penniless. Both were sent to an uncle, Raphael Semmes, in Georgetown, District of Columbia. In his sketch of Admiral Semmes at the celebration of the centennial of his birth, DeLeon, the *Alabama* author, states that young Raphael worked in his uncle's wood-yard, a likely, certainly a possible thing for him to have done. He must have attended some of the private schools in the city as there was no thorough public system of schools then in operation in that locality. The usual subjects for the youth of his day received his care, all elementary; chiefly reading, writing and arithmetic. But either before removal to the city or on visits to his old home afterward, he got some of his development in the best of all ways, in the free, open-air life in the country. Here was room for untrammelled growth in spontaneous rivalry with his play-mates, hardening his constitution, toughening his

fiber, sharpening his brain and bringing forth his power of initiative. Long years afterward when Raphael was in prison in Washington after the close of the strife, it was a tender remembrance that came over him as he looked from his window on his native state, Maryland, and on "the Potomac in whose waters I used to swim and fish as a boy." But even had the opportunities been most abounding, the lad's schooling was too short for him to have acquired more than the primal rudiments as he was "appointed a midshipman from Maryland" by President Adams on April 1, 1826. His natural taste for the sea was thus gratified when he was only a few months over sixteen, and he started upon that road which was to carry him to the pinnacle of his greatness.

His father's brother, Benedict I. Semmes, may have had a part in this auspicious happening for the youth. He was a citizen of Maryland, a farmer, and had served in the state legislature. He did not become a member of Congress till 1829, but his political standing may have been sufficient to be of weight with the President in behalf of his nephew.

The grade of midshipman goes back to Colonial days when the sons of leading men felt it an honor to be provided with such a berth on English men-of-

war. There is a tradition that George Washington was once destined for that service with the warrant in his pocket, but the rigid investigation of Park Benjamin fails to reveal his name in any such capacity in the official English archives. These young men were the raw stuff from which officers were to come, and the rank lasted till superseded by the cadets in the Naval Academy in Annapolis which was established in 1845.

It was not treated as of a very dignified grade, the navy regulations sandwiching it in between masters-at-arms and the ship's cooks. The duties were prescribed as follows :

“Midshipmen.

“1. No particular duties are assigned to this class of officers.

“2. They are promptly and faithfully to execute all the orders for the public service which they shall receive from their commanding officer.

“3. The commanding officer will consider the midshipmen as a class of officers meriting in a special degree their fostering care ; they will see therefore that the schoolmaster performs his duties toward them by diligently and faithfully instructing them in those sciences appertaining to their profession, and that he use his utmost care to render them proficient therein.

“4. Midshipmen are to keep regular journals and deliver them to the commanding officer at the stated periods in due form.

“5. They are to consider it as the duty they owe to their country to employ a due portion of their time in the study of naval tactics and in acquiring a thorough and extensive knowledge of all the various duties to be performed on board a ship of war.”

Among the common run of men aboard, their whole range of activity was tersely, if ungrammatically, summed up as “doing what they were told and that—quick!”

The quarters for fashioning the future captains and admirals were down in the steerage of the old sailing vessels, narrow, cramped, ill smelling. There was no way of heating the place, but in the severest weather the shifty occupants were accustomed to heat an iron ball and bury it in a bucket of sand, and then sit around this with their feet on it. They packed their belongings in lockers and drawers, oftentimes jamming them so full that the door could only be closed by the owner stretching himself, and bracing his feet and back against the wall or ceiling and closing up his goods by such sheer strength that when he opened the receptacle some things would fly out in the manner of a Jack-in-a-box. They slept in hammocks, and many were the pranks they played on one another, hiding some

parts or cutting the suspending cords, and letting down the sleeping inmate with hard bumps on the floor. Here in these dark and foul precincts, the rats found happy homes and scampered in great freedom. A warmer welcome was extended to the swarms of cockroaches, as it was believed by many that they fed upon the tribe of smaller insects that were more pertinacious, and more shunned in polite society.

In clothing there was a community of interest, and it was the usual thing to borrow, or rather to take, whatever articles of dress each needed, especially on occasions of dignity when it was necessary to make a good appearance. Generally, there was only about a third of a full outfit of all garments for the whole group, but as a fair proportion was always asleep or at rest, none were forced to go only partly clad. The pea jackets, of course, were most in demand, and usage set aside a handily placed box, dubbed "pea jacket hole," into which each cast this article as soon as he came below, and out of it snatched the one on top as he went out again. There was danger from all this easy familiarity with other people's raiment, and the authorities of the Navy Department tried to check the habit. They solemnly fulminated against the practice and

ordered the captains to put a stop to it as it was "improvident and unclean."

But perhaps the youngsters felt they had an example of indifference, even slovenliness, set by their betters in the bad fare served them. Loathsome food was the "hardtack infested with weevils," then rebaked, weevils and all inside, and placed before hungry mouths. Grog was a standard part of the rations, though it was no longer dealt out after 1842. During the previous period, there was solicitude shown for the health of the newcomers by the older hands, as these would generously drink the allowance themselves to remove temptation from their younger brethren. It scarcely sweetened their nourishment to have their dining tables set in these unpleasant surroundings, but here all their bodily functions of eating, drinking, sleeping, resting had to be indulged.

What with these limited confines, the darkness, the cold, the bad air, the unsavory scents, the vermin racing and crawling, the insects biting, the exchanged clammy costumes, the mixed diet—there is some admiration due the middy bolder than the rest who ventured to complain that the steerage was uncomfortable, even if he did get a crushing answer. "Uncomfortable, sir! uncomfortable!



Why, what blanked fool ever joined the navy for comfort?"<sup>1</sup>

It was a rough experience, with superiors as well as with equals. An angry captain would strike with his fist or bowl over with anything handy. One knocked a middy down with his speaking trumpet, but the boy being spirited and short-sighted appealed to the commodore. He received opprobrious language from the captain and made a second complaint, and finally the captain was haled before a court martial, and, of course, acquitted on the defense that it was an accident. He further relieved his feelings by charging that the middy was actuated by "malignant motives." It is not known but it may be safely said that that middy made no more appeals above his captain's head. His only consolation was that in the future when he walked the quarter-deck he could vent his spite on his subordinates. So loud were the murmurs against such tyranny that the matter of the treatment of midshipmen reached the ears of Congress and an investigation was had, but the officers won, as nothing was done to soften the harshness.

Among themselves also blows were frequent, and rough and tumble fights not rare. But as became

<sup>1</sup> Benjamin, "U. S. Naval Academy," p. 89.

gentlemen of their age and dignity, the settlement of differences by the duel was common. In this they were only patterning after their officers who had the sanction of the past centuries and the indorsement of President Jackson, who opposed this form of combat between citizens or between officers and citizens, but declared he "would not interfere between officers whose profession was fighting and who were trained to arms."<sup>1</sup>

With the officers there was a degree of caution and ceremonial that the midshipmen with more of the fire of youth and less of the advantages of quarters could not emulate. Notwithstanding the disparity, deaths on the field of honor were as frequent proportionately in one as in the other rank. While no figures can be produced fatalities occurred from time to time among the midshipmen. As to the number of these contests, a competent investigator has counted up eighty duels in the "Old Navy" among officers and midshipmen, in fifty-two of which midshipmen participated.<sup>2</sup> Some of the offenses were trivial, some of the duels ridiculous, pathetic, and tragical.

One instance combines all these elements. On

<sup>1</sup> Benjamin, "U. S. Naval Academy," p. 96.

<sup>2</sup> Paullin, "Dueling in the Old Navy," p. 1157.

one occasion a vessel with her quota of midshipmen, while at anchor in the harbor of Genoa, was visited by royalty. Of course, the midshipmen in full uniform were drawn up in their place in honor of the guests. After these had passed two of the young soldiers fell to disputing as to whether the queen in the party was a fine-looking lady or not. One of them ended the altercation by skilfully ducking his head and driving the point of his cocked hat into his opponent's eye. After they were dismissed, a small party sat at one end of the dining-table in the steerage drawing up a challenge. Another party sat at the other end waiting to receive and answer it. After these preliminaries had been duly observed, the two sides, principals, seconds and assistants, got into the same boat and were rowed ashore, and jointly bought ramrods for their pistols as they had forgot to bring them along. On taking stock of their money, it was found that in all purses combined there was enough to hire only one carriage, so all got in and set out for the open country, as they thought. No one speaking Italian, the cabman, not understanding English, naturally supposed they wanted to see the sights, and he drove from church to church, from statue to fountain, in spite of all the frantic gesticulations and fierce words of his passen-

gers. Finally despairing of ever reaching a clear space for a punctilious encounter, they got out in the middle of the street, stepped off the distance and began to load. It was then seen that the bullets were too large for the bore, and they had to be pared down with knives that passed from one to another indiscriminately. At last, after all these amusing incidents, the two principals faced each other with deadly intent and fired. One was removed with a shattered knee, a cripple for life, the other was unhurt, but all amicably returned to the vessel together. There was no investigation of the matter either there or in the city.

Amid unfavorable surroundings, and the distraction of quarrels, the midshipmen were expected to get an education fitting for subsequent high official station. For entrance, each had to meet these qualifications: "No person will be appointed a midshipman unless evidence be furnished that he can read and write well; understands the principles of English grammar; and the elementary rules of arithmetic and geography."<sup>1</sup>

After admission, there were three schools, so called, that he could attend, New York, Norfolk, and Boston. But he was expected to put in most

<sup>1</sup> "Navy Regulations of 1831."

of his time at sea, finishing up at one of these three institutions toward the close of his term. On board ship he was to stand watch, do all he was told to do, and yet prosecute his studies so as to be ready for the examination at the date set, with the extra help he would get at the school for the last few months.

There was a teacher on board who did his task when and where he could, though usually in the forenoon. There was no regular place of meeting,—sometimes behind “a screen on the gun deck, sometimes in the semi-darkness of the berth deck, and sometimes the captain would give the use of his forward cabin.” The attendance had to be very irregular as those on watch could not be present. Of the rest some had been roused at four to superintend the deck washing, while others had been on watch from midnight to four, and both sets were liable to be sleepy and sluggish. Again, most distracting of all, any pupil must answer an urgent call elsewhere, and the whole class might have to vacate their premises for some movement or evolution of the crew. Over and through all were the constant bustle and noise inseparable from the life on ocean-going craft. The teachers too were hardly of high grade; they could not be, on an annual

salary of only \$900, increased after many years to \$1,200.

With such unsystematized methods went confusion and differences of purpose. Some captains advised their young charges to study French, Spanish, and dancing only. Others counseled them to eschew books entirely but to "keep their eyes open," and get a thorough grasp of the practical side of their calling. Some extremists, who themselves possibly had only meager knowledge, churlishly objected to their understanding the chronometer and other instruments of precision, feeling that that was a secret reserved for the captain and higher officers and declaring that it was "officious and unbecoming the character of gentlemen" for them to handle such apparatus.

But there was an official list of subjects they were to be examined in before being rated as passed midshipmen. By 1821 it was promulgated that they were to pass proper tests in "rigging and stowing a ship, the management of artillery at sea, arithmetic, navigation, and the mode of making astronomical calculations for nautical purposes."<sup>1</sup> This same authority stressed the importance of moral habits and upright character. Just twenty years after-

<sup>1</sup> "Rules and Regulations of the Navy Department, 1821."

ward, the requirements can be seen in more detail as the examination then covered "Bowditch's Navigation," "Playfair's Euclid" (Books 1, 2, 3, 4, 6), "McClure's Spherics," Spanish or French language, mental and moral philosophy, and "Bourdon's Algebra," besides the useful applications included under the broad term "seamanship." But there was one subject that was insisted on by all with unyielding firmness, the keeping of a diary. This had to pass the captain's inspection, and no leave ashore was permitted the unlucky midshipman who overlooked this requisite. Many were doubtless only mere repositories of the driest routine matters, but it was a happy device to teach spelling, punctuation, composition and handwriting. Generally, however, the theoretical branches of the course were neglected till the last six months which were usually spent at one of the three schools. Then the candidates gave all their strength to "boning up" on these, trusting to a stimulated memory to retain enough to satisfy the examiners. Ordinarily there was little attempt, even if there had been time and inclination, at an understanding of the principles of any of the scientific topics that had to be covered. The rules and formulas for methods of calculations were memorized and recited. It is very

likely that the average board did not want too deep an insight on the part of the applicant, as the members might then have had to display their own ignorance.

The examinations were oral, conducted by a committee consisting of a commodore as chairman and two or three captains as members, with a teacher often present as the specialist in mathematics and sciences. For a number of years they convened once annually in Barnum's Hotel in Baltimore. Here sitting in a room they had the candidates wait their turn in the barroom below or in the lobby, while they all, one at a time, came before this group that opened or barred farther progress in the navy. Usually a little over an hour was given to each individual, more than half, or sometimes all, the period being devoted to the practical part, seamanship.

Woe be to the expert assistant if he went too thoroughly into some scientific topic in his questions. The others of course could not follow him, and it would be too embarrassing for the superiors to be at the mercy of a subordinate. He would be cut short, and at times his farther aid dispensed with on some plausible pretext. Some of these were themselves superficial and opinionated. One amus-



ing instance is remembered in connection with the famous scientist, Maury. In his examination he boldly disregarded the formula from Bowditch for lunar distances and capably treated the case as a problem in spherical trigonometry. The professor blundered along after him, and finally declared that Maury was wrong in his exposition, but Maury valiantly stood his ground, and at last appealed to the full board sitting solemnly by. These evidently knew nothing about Maury's demonstration, but felt it safer to rely on their authority and sided with the professor. So Maury, "probably the most learned navigator the navy ever had," suffered because of their stupidity, and in spite of his great talents passed as only number twenty-seven in a class of forty and lost two years in promotion.<sup>1</sup>

The destiny of a youth often, no doubt, depended on the temper or caprice of the chairman whose fancy might be tickled by a bluff answer. There is a comical illustration on record that might be typical of many.

The following account of one of these original tests is preserved :

Commodore : "Mr. Tatnall, what would be your course supposing you were off a lea shore, the wind

<sup>1</sup> Benjamin, "U. S. Naval Academy," p. 116.

blowing a gale, both anchors and your rudder gone, all your canvas carried away, and your ship scudding rapidly toward the breakers?"

Tatnall: "I cannot conceive, sir, that such a combination of disaster could possibly befall a ship in one voyage."

Commodore: "Tut, tut, young gentleman; we must have your opinion, supposing such a case to have actually occurred."

Tatnall: "Well, sir,—sails all carried away, do you say, sir?"

Commodore: "Aye, all, every rag."

Tatnall: "Anchor gone too, sir?"

Commodore: "Aye, not an uncommon case."

Tatnall: "No rudder, either?"

Commodore: "Aye, rudder unshipped. (*Tatnall drops his head despairingly in deep thought.*) Come, sir, come bear a hand about it. What would you do?"

Tatnall (*at last and desperate*): "Well, I'd let the infernal tub go to the devil, where she ought to go."

Commodore (*joyously*): "Right, sir, perfectly right. That will do, sir. The clerk will note that Mr. Tatnall has passed."<sup>1</sup>

While preparing the midshipmen by this course

<sup>1</sup> Benjamin, "U. S. Naval Academy," pp. 116, 117.

of training and education, the government paid them for their time and services. The scale of pay varied from interval to interval, but ranged from something like \$200 annually to about \$400, making allowance for rations and variety and length of service. It was popular, as there seems to have been no lack of applicants. During the years of Semmes' apprenticeship, there were 374 midshipmen in 1827 ; 392 in 1828 ; 435 in 1829 ; 435 in 1830 ; 377 in 1831 ; and 345 in 1832.

The pregnant years of budding manhood Semmes spent in this environment, with its narrow quarters on board ship, amid fighting, dueling companions, snatching whatever leisure he could from all the calls of duty and the diversions of comradeship for his books. All these experiences came at that age with him corresponding to the college course of to-day, a period decisive of the life path of so many men. So frequently then are preferences developed, ambitions aroused, and ways opened. It was under this system that Semmes received his nautical preparation, got a mastery of naval details, laid the foundation of that sea knowledge, in a word was fitted, so far as instruction and discipline can shape and mould native gifts and character, for that meteoric work he did a third of a century later.

Because of its shortcomings and defects, it was admirably suited for bringing out the exceptional man who had room for expansion. The two great Civil War admirals, Farragut and Porter, were both midshipmen, while Winslow, the only man ever to bring down Semmes' flag, was contemporary with Semmes in this nautical academy.

Semmes' passage through this seminary of maritime nurture can be briefly traced by the few landmarks surviving in the archives. He was first assigned to the *Lexington* which was sent to the Island of Trinidad in the fall of 1826 to bear home the body of Commodore O. H. Perry, of Lake Erie fame in 1813. Afterward the ship cruised in the West Indies, and also crossed over to the Mediterranean, Semmes remaining with her for two years. With a brief respite on land, he sailed on the *Erie* for Curaçoa, in the Spanish Main, and later in the *Brandywine* he visited that region, until in September, 1831, he was ordered ashore, as he had then spent the probationary period for midshipmen, five years. During that period he had had chance to learn the channels, the reefs, the headlands and bars of the West Indies, and had had a glimpse of two of the continents of the Old World, Africa and Europe. To strengthen him to face that inquisitorial body in

Baltimore, he was ordered to the Norfolk Navy Yard to carry on his mathematical studies. Here he had the help of a well-known teacher, Professor Don Roderigo. So far as known, Semmes had not wasted his moments during the preceding five years, and he likely profited eminently by his regular instruction, now fortunately without the interruptions unavoidable on ship. At any rate, all things possibly combining, his physical vigor from inheritance and from early days in the country, his native keenness of mind, his coaching at Norfolk, gave him the first honors of his class, and he joined the corps of passed midshipmen<sup>1</sup> on April 28, 1832.

<sup>1</sup> Maffitt, *South Atlantic Quarterly*, Nov., 1877.

## CHAPTER II

### REGULAR SERVICE : LOSS OF THE " SOMERS "

DURING the three years after winning the grade of passed midshipman, Semmes spent about twelve months in charge of chronometers, perhaps thus early developing for these instruments a taste that he was to have so many chances to gratify some three decades later on the *Alabama*, when he always seized this property of his prizes. The other two-thirds of this period were apparently leisure moments which he utilized in part at least for the faithful study of law in the office of his brother, in Cumberland, and acquired a knowledge that was to be of inestimable value to him when he was cut off from all libraries and expert counsel, and had to depend on his own legal lore for the determination of intricate questions. It was his ambition to practice in Washington, the capital of the country, but he remained in his calling and was ordered to the *Constellation* as acting master in July, 1835.

He was on her for two years cruising in the waters between the two American continents, learning all

the tortuous lanes among the thousands of islands in that region. But he was not idle during his hours off duty. He had taken aboard with him a collection of books of law and during his absence on the waters he was adding to his knowledge of this subject.

On his return he was granted leave of absence and went to Cincinnati, then a small frontier town, to visit friends. Here his acquaintance with the principles of Blackstone, Kent and other writers first came to light in a practical way. Against Salmon P. Chase, afterward Chief Justice of the United States, he successfully defended some young men who were prosecuted for the destruction of the printing press of an abolition paper.<sup>1</sup>

But this was not the only event of his stay in this Western town. It was here that he solemnized his marriage. It is related by his eldest son :

“On May 5, 1837, Raphael Semmes, then a lieutenant in the United States Navy, married Anne Elizabeth Spencer, the only daughter of Oliver Marlborough Spencer and Electra Ogden. Mrs. Semmes' grandfather, Oliver Spencer, a revolutionary colonel, had moved from New Jersey to

<sup>1</sup> New Orleans *Times-Democrat* of Sept. 26, 1909, quoting Mrs. Electra Semmes Colston, the eldest daughter of Admiral Semmes.

Cincinnati, when the latter was nothing more than a military post, and her father was the first mayor of the town.”<sup>1</sup> On March 6th of that year Semmes had been “promoted to be a lieutenant from February 9th preceding.”

From this time on to the Mexican War he followed the usual routine of naval officers. He served on the *Consort*, *Warren* and *Porpoise*, did duty in the navy yards at Norfolk and Pensacola, took part in harbor surveys of various Southern ports, all doubtless monotonous enough to an active brain. But Semmes got some variety of experience at Pensacola by attending the courts, and practicing his agreeable profession. It was here also that he purchased lands on the Perdido River, with several of his comrades.

As the troubles with Mexico began to thicken, he was ordered in 1844 to convey a diplomatic messenger to Vera Cruz on the small steamer which he then commanded. He did so and accompanied the envoy to the city of Mexico, thus getting a chance, which of course his keen insight and close observation fully utilized, of “becoming acquainted with the temper and feelings of the country.” Just before the outbreak of hostilities between the two na-

<sup>1</sup>“So. Hist. Soc. Papers,” Vol. 38, 1910, p. 29.



tions, he was despatched on a cruise of five or six weeks to St. Domingo, and it was here he learned from some American newspapers of the first clash of arms, and of the American victories. Continuing on to Pensacola, the naval base for the operations against Mexico, he remained there only long enough to get water and provisions, some eight or ten days, and then rejoined the fleet at Vera Cruz, some time in July, 1846. Shortly after he was assigned to the command of the brig *Somers*, of ten guns, her captain having been invalided home.

The boat had unpleasant historical associations. It was on board of her, four years before, that three of her crew, one a son of the then secretary of the United States treasury, had been hanged for conspiring to mutiny. But Semmes was not troubled with any superstitions and soon won the high commendation of the officer in command of the blockade. One of the most intrepid of Semmes' brother cruisers during the Civil War, J. W. Maffitt, relates the following incident in regard to the handling of the *Somers* :

“She was placed on blockade service, with orders to permit nothing to enter the port of Vera Cruz. It was the old commodore's delight to visit the deck at all hours of the night and in all weathers—right

glass in hand—to scan the horizon to seaward of the castle of San Juan d' Ulloa. 'What a perfect *owl* by night, and *hawk* by day, is the commander of your little brig,' he would constantly remark. 'He is never out of place, always the faithful sentinel, true to his beat, in storm or in calm. They call him a sea lawyer. Humph! If he does indulge in Blackstone, I'll be damned if he has neglected his *Dorsey Lever*, for that brig is always handled with seamanlike ability.' ”<sup>1</sup>

Semmes' audacity and determination were put to a severe test of which the same narrator has given us a lively account. A Mexican boat, *Creole*, slipped at frightful hazard through the encompassing line and moored under the guns of the castle. There had been no slackness on the part of Semmes, but he felt chagrined, even angry, that he had been outwitted. "Flaunt your flags and blow your brains out on those infernal bugles. That cargo belongs to the flames and not to your army. Well do I comprehend what are the contents of your steamer when such extraordinary risks are run in getting her into port." He consulted with his aides, and in the dark ran in as close to the shore as safety allowed. A boat with less than ten men

<sup>1</sup> *South Atlantic*, Nov., 1877, p. 5.

on her was "pulled with muffled oars slowly toward the castle ; the instructions were not to make any attempt upon the steamer until half-past eleven o'clock. A gentle land breeze barely swelled the topsails of the *Somers* as she rose and fell with the undulating billows of the Gulf. . . . Six bells were struck (11 P. M.). Thirty minutes more of anxious anticipation were to be endured. Every minute seemed to elongate into twenty. The half hour expired. At the castle there was darkness and nothing more. . . . Suddenly loud cheers broke unrestrainedly from the officers and crew as flashes succeeded by bright flames illumined the frowning castle of San Juan d' Ulloa, the cathedral domes and spires, and the embattled wall of Vera Cruz. . . . Fiercely burned the fated steamer amid the discharge of heavy ordnance, discordant bugle blasts and confusion worse confounded among the Mexican soldiery. Brighter and more fierce grew the conflagration as the shells and Congreve rockets burst in the air, increasing the grandeur of this warlike, pyrotechnic display. Suddenly a dense volume of lurid smoke, mingled with burning timbers, masts and spars, was borne upward, accompanied by an explosion that thundered hoarsely over land and sea, echoing back from the distant

mountains; when, in Egyptian darkness, the curtain fell upon this terrible nautical drama. The *Creole* was destroyed.”<sup>1</sup>

To this same incident Semmes himself devotes only a few very modest lines. Some eight of his crew, he says, “performed the clever exploit of burning the Mexican merchant brig *Creole* under the walls of San Juan d’ Ulloa. They pulled in under cover of night and boarding the vessel without opposition fired her in several places and departed unmolested, although within pistol range of the castle. Some little noise having been made on board the brig when they were in the act of boarding, they were hailed by one of the sentinels; but Lieutenant Parker, speaking the language like a native, gave some satisfactory reply and they were not further noticed.”<sup>2</sup>

It comes as an anti-climax to learn that this gallant deed was all a mistake, as she had been allowed to run into the blockade. The commander of the fleet was using her as a spy ship, and if he had known such an attack was contemplated he would have forbidden it.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Maffitt in *South Atlantic*, Nov., 1877, pp. 6, 7.

<sup>2</sup> “Service Afloat and Ashore,” p. 91.

<sup>3</sup> Spears, “History of Our Navy,” Vol. III, p. 417.

But the *Somers* was soon to end her course. In less than three weeks she was caught in a norther, and sank in a few minutes, the first of the two boats that were to go down under Semmes in his entire life. Of this disaster his pen gives this graphic account to his superior :

“It becomes my painful duty to inform you of the loss of the U. S. Brig *Somers*, late under my command, and of the drowning of more than half her crew. The details of the sad catastrophe are, briefly, as follows: After having been forty-five days maintaining the blockade of Vera Cruz, I anchored, on the evening of the second inst., under Verde Island, where it had been my practice to take shelter from the northwest gales, that blow with such frequency and violence along this coast, at this season of the year. Soon after sunrise, a sail having been descried from the masthead, I immediately got under way, and commenced beating up, between the Verde Islands and Paxaros reefs. In a short time I was enabled with my glass to make out the strange sail to be a man-of-war; whereupon I hoisted my number and had the satisfaction in fifteen or twenty minutes more to see the stranger show that of the *John Adams*.

“The wind, which had been blowing from the W. N. W. when we got under way, gradually hauled to the northward and settled for a while at N. N. E. The barometer having fallen the night previous to 29.80 in., and being still down and the weather looking still unsettled, I was apprehensive of a gale. As soon therefore as the *John Adams* showed her number, I wore and ran down toward

Verde Islands, with the view of coming to and getting my vessel snug before the gale should come on. When I had nearly approached the anchorage, the lookout at the masthead cried 'Sail ho' a second time. On applying my glass in the direction indicated from aloft, I perceived this second sail to be a brig, in the N. E., standing apparently for Vera Cruz (she did afterward run between the inner Anegada and the Blanquilla).

"I immediately abandoned my intention of anchoring, as the gale had not yet set in, and hauling on a wind under topsail and courses, commenced beating up the passage a second time, with the view of placing her between the strange ship and the port, to prevent the possibility of her running the blockade if she should be so inclined. I made one tack toward the Paxaros reef and at the time of the catastrophe was standing on the larboard tack, with the northern point of Verde Island reef a couple of points on my lee-bow. We were still under topsails, courses, jib, and spanker; and the brig did not appear to be too much pressed. I was myself standing on the lee-arm chest, having just passed over from the weather quarter, and with my spy-glass in hand was observing the reef on our lee-bow, to see whether it were possible to weather it or in the event of our not being able to do this, to give timely notice to the officer of the deck to tack ship. I had not been long in this position before the officer of the deck, Lieutenant James L. Parker, the second lieutenant of the brig, remarked to me that he thought it looked a little squally to the windward. I immediately passed over to the weather side and as it looked a little darker than it had done, I ordered him to haul up the mainsail and brail up the spanker, and directed the helm to be

put up. These orders were promptly obeyed. Lieutenant Parker took the mainsail off and had got the spanker about half brailed up when the squall struck us. It did not appear to be very violent nor was its approach accompanied by any foaming of the water or other indications which usually mark the approach of heavy squalls.

“But the brig being flying light, having scarcely any water or provisions, and but six tons of ballast on board, she was thrown over almost instantly so far as to refuse to obey her helm—the pressure of the water on the lee-bow rather inclining her to luff, seeing which I directed the helm to be put down, hoping that I might luff and shake the wind out of her sails until the force of the squall should be spent. The quartermaster at the helm had hardly time to obey this order before the brig was on her beam ends and the water pouring into every hatch and scuttle. Being now convinced that she must speedily go down unless relieved, I ordered the masts to be cut away. The officers and men, who with a few exceptions had by this time gained the weather bulwarks of the vessel, immediately began to cut away the rigging. But as this was a forlorn hope, the brig filling very fast and her masts and yards lying flat upon the surface of the sea, I placed no reliance whatever upon their efforts. A few moments more and I was convinced in spite of all our exertions the brig must inevitably go down. I accordingly turned my attention to the saving of as many lives as possible.

“The boats secured in the gripes, amidships, and the starboard quarter boat were already several feet under water so that it was impossible to reach them ; but we succeeded in disengaging the larboard quarter boat from her davits (a small boat pulling five oars)

and dropped her fortunately to leeward of the brig to prevent her being thrown upon the vessel's side and crushed by the sea. I ordered Midshipman F. G. Clark to take charge of this boat, and with the purser, surgeon and seventeen men, make for Verde Island if possible ; and, after having landed all but the boat's crew, to return and save others. It was now blowing a strong gale, with a heavy sea running, and I deemed it imprudent to trust more men in so small a boat. Beside, I was anxious to shove her off before the vessel should sink lest there might be a rush for her and no life at all be saved. I cannot refrain from expressing in this place my admiration of the noble conduct of several of the men embarked in the boat, who implored the officers by name to take their places ; saying that they would willingly die by the wreck if the officers would but save themselves. Of course none of these generous fellows were permitted to come out and they were all subsequently safely landed as they deserved to be. Midshipman Clark fortunately succeeded in shoving off and pulling some twenty paces from the brig before she went down.

“When she was on the point of sinking beneath us and engulfing us in the waves, I gave the order ‘Every man save himself who can,’ whereupon there was a simultaneous plunge into the sea of about sixty officers and men, each striving to secure some frail object that had drifted from the wreck for the purpose of sustaining himself in the awful struggle with the sea, which awaited him. Some reached a grating, some an oar, some a boat's mast, some a hen-coop ; but many poor fellows sprang into the sea to perish in a few minutes, not being able to find any object of support. Lieutenant Parker and myself, being both swimmers, were fortunate enough



to reach one of the arm chests' gratings which afforded us partial support, but on which we should inevitably have been drowned, if we had not when we had swum some twenty or thirty paces secured an upper half port which came drifting by us. We lashed this with the lanyards attached to it to our grating, and thenceforth got along much better.

“Midshipman Clark after he had landed the officers and men under his charge at Verde Island shoved off a second time, in obedience to the order I had given him, at the imminent peril of his life—for the gale was now blowing with much violence, and the sea running so heavily that it seemed impossible that so small a boat could live—and skirted Verde Island reef to see if it were possible to rescue any of us from the waves. His efforts were rewarded with partial success, as he picked up Lieutenant Parker and myself and one of the seamen. As soon as I had landed I sent Midshipman Clark out again, who ventured as far from the island as he thought the boat would live; but this time he returned unsuccessful, having been unable to descry any floating object whatever. Lieutenant Claiborne saved himself on a small hatch about two feet square, used for covering the pump well, and which he found floating near the wreck. He was thrown with great violence against a reef near Sacrificios, but fortunately escaped without serious injury. As strange as it may appear to you, there cannot have elapsed more than ten minutes between our being struck by the squall and the total disappearance of the *Somers*.

“I feel that I should not be doing justice to the officers and men who were under my command, if I were to close this report without bearing testimony to their uniform coolness and self-possession under

the trying circumstances in which we were placed ; the alacrity with which they obeyed my orders, and when all was over, the generosity with which they behaved toward each other in the water where the struggle was one of life and death.

“I have thus concluded what I have to say in relation to the cause of the disaster and our own exertions ; but with heartfelt acknowledgments it remains for me to inform you of the gallant and feeling manner in which all the foreign men-of-war lying at Sacrificios came to our rescue. They hoisted out and manned boats immediately and at the hazard of their lives put out toward the wreck. They were at first driven back by the violence of the wind and sea, but renewed their efforts upon the first lull, and had the unhopd for satisfaction of saving fourteen more of our unfortunate companions.”

Semmes gave the names of foreign boats and captains that rendered aid, asked for a Court of Inquiry, and appended lists of the saved and lost of his own crew. The formal investigation was made, but he was fully exonerated from all blame.

## CHAPTER III

### IN THE MEXICAN WAR

SHORTLY after his vindication in reference to the loss of the *Somers*, Semmes again became flag-lieutenant to the commodore, Conner, at the head of the fleet. Scott, having planned to enter the country through Vera Cruz, made a descent upon that city with some twelve thousand troops, who were landed in March, 1847, near the city with the aid of the vessels of war. The enemy refusing to surrender, it was necessary to bombard his fortifications and make a breach in them for a storming party. Scott's guns proving too light for this heavy duty, he appealed to the navy, then under the command of Commodore M. C. Perry, who five or six years afterward led the famous embassy to Japan. When the request for his artillery was made, "the commodore's courteous and gallant reply, couched in Lacedæmonian brevity, was 'Certainly, general, but I must fight them.'"

Semmes of course had an important part in transferring those heavy pieces to land, mounting them and firing them. After getting his battery in readi-

ness, the night before his deadly work was to start, Semmes' spirit was so moved by the historical associations and by reflections on the circumstances, that he could not sleep and he has given us a touching, impressive picture of the occasion: "About midnight I wandered to a small eminence in the neighborhood of our battery to look forth upon the scene. It was perfectly calm. The fleet at Sacrificios was just visible through the gloom and was sleeping quietly at its anchors without other sign of life than a solitary light burning at the gaff-end of the commodore. The castle of San Juan d' Ulloa, magnified out of all proportion by the uncertain starlight and looking ten times more somber and defiant than ever, appeared to enjoy equal repose. Even the sea seemed to have gone to sleep after the turmoil of the recent norther, as the only sound that reached the ear from that direction was a faint, very faint, murmur, hoarse and plaintive as the lazy swell, with scarcely energy enough to break, stranded itself on the beach. The cricket and the katydid and myriads of other insects—the South is the land of insects—chirruped in a sort of inharmonious melody reminding one of his far-off home and of fireside scenes. But if nature was thus inclined to repose, man was not, for death still held

his carnival within the walls of the beleaguered city. Those horrid mortars of ours were in awful activity. The demons incarnate, all begrimed with powder and smoke, who served them at this midnight hour . . . gave the doomed city no respite, not even for a single moment, as the air was never without its tenant winging its way on its errand of death. I sat and watched these missiles for an hour or more, and I shall never forget the awful scream apparently proceeding from female voices which came ringing on the night air, as one of those terrible engines of destruction exploded—carrying death and dismay no doubt to some family circle. No sight could have been more solemn and impressive—the imagination dwelling all the while on the awful tragedy which was being enacted—than the flight of those missiles through the air.”<sup>1</sup>

All were astir early the next morning, and working their guns with coolness and precision, but soon “the city was beaten ; and on the same afternoon we had the satisfaction of seeing a white flag pass into General Scott’s camp.” The navy guns had thrown nearly two thousand projectiles into the enemy’s quarters, and the army about seven or eight hundred more.

<sup>1</sup> “Service Afloat and Ashore,” p. 137.

Shortly after Semmes was engaged in an expedition against Tuspapan, on a river of that name about a hundred miles northwest of Vera Cruz. After the bombardment of the place a small detachment went up the river to seize any boats that might be found. The little incident furnishes an insight into Semmes' strict ideas of discipline. He writes : " We bivouacked in a corn-field as the night set in and so far availed ourselves of the privileges of conquest as to pluck as many of the delicious ears of corn just then in the milk as would feed our tired and famished seamen, who had been pulling their oars unremittingly for the last six or eight hours. The owner whom we had hoped to conciliate and make some trifling present to absconded like the rest upon our approach. . . . We made good use of the old woman's gourd full of eggs, and very nice turkey eggs they were, but molested nothing else. One of my sailors who had been seized with a fancy for a trade took down from a peg over the bed rather a nice looking *sombrero*—broad-rimmed straw hat—and trying it on and finding it to fit him had hung up his own in its stead ; but as my eye happened to fall on him just at the moment I made him 'swap back,' as the boys say. He defended himself by saying that he meant no harm, and

that a fair exchange was no robbery the world over.”

Semmes now ceased further connection with the navy during the war, as he was selected by Commodore Perry to bear a protest from the President of the United States to the Mexican government against the treatment of Passed Midshipman Rogers as a spy. Rogers while under Semmes on the *Somers* had been captured during “a daring night reconnoissance of the enemy’s powder magazine on the mainland near the little island of Sacrificios.” He had wanted to go in disguise, but Semmes had required him to wear the appropriate uniform, with a pea-jacket thrown over it to protect himself from the night air. In spite of this precaution he was regarded by the Mexicans as having violated the laws of war and was kept in close confinement. When the news reached the United States much sympathy was aroused, and finally Polk took the step of sending a special messenger to Mexico.

Semmes’ imagination was so fired with the prospect of going with the invading force to visit the “Halls of the Montezumas” that he could scarcely sleep. On the invitation of the commodore he picked out an attendant from the sailors whom he afterward humorously referred to as “my personal

staff." Perry instructed him to overtake the army as rapidly as he could with safety, and then be guided by Scott as to the best means of discharging his mission. Perry also addressed a letter to Scott informing him of the nature of Semmes' errand, and asking his assistance toward carrying out the wishes of the President.

Semmes was provided at Vera Cruz with horses and traveling necessaries, and an escort of twenty men. The first night out was the occasion for an adventure that tested his courage and determination. He was in the house of the *alcalde* of the village, in a loft, "jotting down by the dismal light of a farthing candle stuck in its own grease on the top of an ancient chest of drawers these veritable memoirs . . . when a villain stole one of my revolvers which I had carelessly laid down on a bench. With the assistance of the *alcalde*, whom I had summoned from the kitchen fire to act in his magisterial capacity, I soon got on the track of the rogue, however, and coming upon him just as he had fired one of the barrels in the road to see how he liked it, I seized him to his great astonishment—it was dark—and made him deliver up. I am sorry to add that the scamp was one of our Anglo-Saxon teamsters, picked up perhaps



somewhere in the *purlieus* of the bowery. In consideration of his blood and of his being one of the heroes of Mexico, I released him from other penalty than sharp reprimand, enjoining him to remember for the future, however, his long and honorable descent all the way from the Danish pirates who were robbers of land only."

As he passed on his way his eyes were open and his mind alert and he notes matters meteorological, sociological, natural phenomena and military movements and events, but nothing occurred affecting him personally or his own immediate actions with regard either to the object of his journey or his part in the conflict, until he reached Jalapa, the headquarters of Scott. Of course Semmes lost no time in making known his arrival and his purpose, and at once he wrote Scott :

"I understood you to say in the conversation I had the honor to hold with you, that although you had no escort then at your command, with which to forward me to the city of Mexico, in the execution of my mission, I might continue with the army in its progress; and that when you should reach some convenient point, near the city, you would either put me in personal communication with the government, or send forward my despatches. I have this morning been waited on by Lieutenant Williams, your *aide-de-camp*, who informs me on your behalf that you have changed your resolution

on this point, and that you will not permit me to hold any intercourse with the Mexican government.

“Commodore Perry has been charged by the President of the United States to make a communication with the government of Mexico, with the nature of which you have been made acquainted. He has selected me as his agent to carry out the views of the President, and has directed me to apply to you for the means of executing his orders. With regard to the question as to who is the proper channel through which this communication is to be made, I can of course have nothing to say—that must be settled by higher authority; but the President has thought proper to judge of this for himself, and I am here by authority of one of the Departments (mediately) as his humble agent. I have specific orders from my commander-in-chief to place personally (with your assistance) my despatch in the hands of the minister of foreign relations; or if the Mexican government will not permit me to proceed to the capital in person, to forward it by some safe conveyance and await an answer.

“My object in addressing you this note is to enquire whether I understand you as deciding that you will not (at your convenience) afford me the facilities requested of you by Commodore Perry; and that you will not permit me to hold any intercourse, personal or otherwise, with the Mexican government.

“If this be your decision, as a military man, you must see the propriety of giving it to me in writing in order that I may exhibit it to my commander-in-chief as a sufficient reason for failing to execute his orders. As soon as I receive this I shall hold myself in readiness to return to the squadron by the first conveyance.

“I enclose for your inspection my order in the premises from Commodore Perry, together with a copy of the despatch of that officer to the Mexican government; from which you will be able to see that my mission cannot have in the remotest degree any bearing upon your military operations. I will be obliged to you, if you will return me these papers after perusal.”

To this epistle Scott answered in a longer one that he had information that Rogers was held “as an honorable prisoner of war at large on parole within the city of Mexico,” that he had had no communication with the Mexican political government, “if in fact there be any government in the country,” that he was ready to do all he could at any time not only for Rogers but for the other prisoners held by the Mexicans, that perhaps it would be better for Semmes to refer the business to the other “functionary” that the President had sent from Washington to treat with the Mexican government, that when nearer the capital he might “communicate officially under cover of a flag and a heavy escort with anybody there that may be in authority on the subject of prisoners of war generally,” and that Semmes’ communication might go forward then. He adds: “In the meantime you can remain here, return to Commodore Perry’s squadron, or advance

with the army as may seem to you best. I have no advice to offer on the subject."

To Semmes it was inexplicable why Scott had made no effort to get an exchange of prisoners, some of whom had been in Mexican hands under harsh treatment for several months. Scott had held unofficial conversations on the subject with Mexican representatives, but had done nothing of a formal or positive nature, though he had had a chance in Vera Cruz when he had captured five thousand men, whom he had released on parole without asking for any Americans in return. He was, besides, putting himself in an awkward position in refusing to allow an agent of the President to take up the case unless through him (Scott). Altogether Scott "manifested a most unaccountable apathy with regard to their exchange."

But Semmes cheerfully decided to abide with the army and see what he could do for Mexico. He freely rode about as he pleased, since the natives had learned such a severe lesson that they did not molest parties even so small as only two or three.

About two months later, July 11th, Scott took some steps to aid the unfortunates in the keeping of the Mexicans. He proposed an exchange of a small number of officers including Rogers, and Semmes

went on with the detachment under a flag of truce. After a toilsome ride they came in sight of Mexican pickets who scampered away at a lively gait, even though under command of two generals, one of whom had been president of Mexico and afterward "President of a cockpit," when his civic term had expired. Finally a fleet American messenger overtook them and was informed that one of the Generals, the one that had not been President, would meet the American representatives the next morning "to arrange preliminaries" for an interview,—and all this ceremony when the Americans had counted on finishing the whole business in five minutes.

The next morning at the appointed time and place the envoys met this Mexican general himself, "a good-looking man, rather stout, . . . quite dignified and gentlemanlike in his manners . . . mounted on a small pony . . . not well dressed . . . a somewhat villainous expression of countenance. . . . After a mutual salute we explained to him briefly our business, and our orders, if permitted, to enter the city of Mexico and present our despatches in person to the president. But he politely told us . . . no officer from our camp could be permitted to enter the city." But he would forward their despatches thither safely.

Much as they wanted to get a view of the famed spot—seven or eight miles farther would have given that boon—Semmes and his brethren were obliged to forego that pleasure for the present. Handing over to the Mexican their despatches, they took leave of him in the following formal manner as Semmes relates: “It is hard to outdo a Mexican in politeness, but Captain Kearney and I were determined to have the last bow, and so we bowed his generalship half-way back to his lancers, and then, turning our horses’ heads, with another bow, we commenced our descent to where we had halted our troops.” A dozen years later, in Washington, we shall see Semmes again grimly outdoing a rival in ceremoniousness, in the parlor of a noted social leader.

The next morning he was back in Puebla, after an absence of a little over two days, but while it was an agreeable excursion for Semmes it was bootless for poor Rogers, as Santa Anna never deigned “to give any reply to General Scott’s communication until we had given him another licking.” But even then when he did so condescend, there was no Rogers in his keeping to make mention of, as that active officer had escaped and made his way to Scott’s headquarters, reaching there early in

August, a little over a fortnight after Semmes had made his ride out to the Mexican pickets.

Semmes was now at liberty to retire from the hardships and dangers of the advance, but the profession of arms was too dear to his heart for him to turn his back on such a chance. "I had no thought, however," he says, "of turning to the squadron, now that we were on the eve of commencing our glorious campaign. . . . I had an excellent excuse too for remaining with the army, as our communications with Vera Cruz had been for some time cut off, except as they were occasionally reopened by the upward passage to us of reinforcements."

Shortly after, he was appointed an aid to General W. J. Worth, and was on his staff to the end of the war. In this capacity naturally he had but little or no independence of movement or individuality of decision on matters affecting events of any moment. But he lost no chance to keep up with the stratagems of the armies, and to record the details. He was an able advocate of Worth in the petty squabble that broke out between him and Scott, but that was all mainly aside from Semmes' own path, and it is unnecessary to deal with it any further here.

He also studied the land,—the mountains, hills,

passes, roads,—all with the purpose of the soldier as influencing marches, countermarches, feints, and diversions. He is especially explicit in describing the military points of the valley of Mexico, and comparing the American expedition and its difficulties with that other foreign inroad over three centuries earlier led by Cortez. He quotes at length from the personal letters of that wonderful and brutal Spanish explorer and notes errors due to enthusiasm. He also identifies features in that narrative and calculates what changes in marked instances had been wrought by wind and water, and the other forces of nature. Armed with this engineering knowledge, he freely criticizes the tactics of the commanding officers, not in the captious tone of ignorance but with fairness and firmness. Both Mexican and American mistakes are handled with this impartiality.

He could also characterize the men themselves, as he was a close student of his fellow beings. He catalogues Scott's qualities, his "clear head," "remarkable memory," "excellent heart," "his large and comprehensive views of things," "superior military talents," "with some petulance and irascibility of temperament" and "a little egotism." Worth had "quickness of apprehension," "power



of combination," "ready resource," "vivacity of conversation," and was a man of "acquirements and of general reading." Twiggs "has a frank and open countenance that at once bespeaks his character as a blunt and fearless soldier." Quitman, a lawyer, "had the rare tact to conciliate the regular officers over whose head he was appointed," and was "a zealous amateur soldier," in love with his new profession.

But the future is the crucible for opinions. In one instance at least Semmes' judgment was overwhelmingly endorsed by the infallible verdict of experience. He gave his estimate of one of the engineers, Captain Lee, whose services he declared "were invaluable to his chief. Endowed with a mind which has no superior in his corps and possessing great energy of character, he examined, counseled, and advised, with a judgment, tact, and discretion worthy of all praise. His talent for topography was peculiar, and he seemed to receive impressions intuitively which it cost other men much labor to acquire." He was passing judgment upon Robert E. Lee eleven years before Lee took command of the army before Richmond.

Semmes' own worth was weighed by his superior, General Worth, and of course, with a person of his

keenness of observation, his ability to read his comrades, his bearing and his skill of expression, the balance had to be favorable. General Worth in at least three despatches in the latter half of 1847 renders strong testimony as to Semmes' "intelligence and bravery," "habitual gallantry, intelligence and devotion," and once in a more formal manner as follows :

"To Lieutenant Semmes of the Navy, volunteer aide-de-camp, the most cordial thanks of the general of the division are tendered for his uniform gallantry and assistance ; and the general-in-chief is respectfully requested to present the conduct of this accomplished and gallant officer to the special notice of the chief of this distinguished branch of the public service—our glorious Navy."

## CHAPTER IV

### IMPRESSIONS AND INFLUENCES OF THE MEXICAN WAR

ASIDE from Semmes' direct share in this struggle between the Saxon and Latin, it was an experience whose formative influences had their part in his great work some fifteen years later and also in the thrilling story that he wrote in later life. In the incursion southward against a sister republic his mind was trained and his pen sharpened for the coming climax of his career.

The work and the moods of nature constantly claimed his thoughts. The uprearing masses, the shapes of summits, the slopes, the valleys, all appealed to his inner being. From his deck afar out he never tired of contemplating the giant Orizaba, "rising with the regularity of a faultless cone," though seamed and scarred by avalanche and erosion. Subsequently, on the expedition to the capital, one of the many scenes of bewildering grandeur presented to him reminds him "very much of the mountainous parts of Pennsylvania except that it was much more broken."

Naturally a seaman would be more alert to the whims of the weather than to the forms of the solid crust of the earth. His penetrating mind sought to pierce the mystery of the northers that rage so devastatingly on the east coast of Mexico during the winter, or dry, season, from October to April. He believed them caused by the rush of cool air, made to rise by the rays of the sun heating the vast plain lying east of the Rocky Mountain range. Scientists nowadays connect these gales with an area of low pressure in the Mississippi basin, though Semmes' theory may be related to that.

Again, to account for the heavy rainfall in Jalapa, he reasoned that the "sea breeze, or southeasterly winds of the Gulf, sweeping over the arid plains of the *tierra Caliente*, become highly rarefied, or charged with moisture; and coming here first in contact with the mountains, they find their dew-point at about this elevation. Their condensation and dispersion in rain is of course the consequence."

The result of natural environment on men did not escape his investigating spirit. A good instance is his discussion of yellow fever in Vera Cruz. He gives an acute analysis of several pages and comes so near to the solution of the problem that it is almost incredible that he missed it. He rejected

the hypothesis that the disease is due to heat alone, or to any special winds, or to rain alone, but to a combination of all these in conjunction with certain conditions in the locality. He discovered around the city many "stagnant pools and fens with a vegetation of aquatic shrubs and plants. These decaying from year to year have deposited along the margins of the pools a rich mould of vegetable matter whence have sprung up thickets and jungles. It is easy to perceive what a powerful effect the rays of a vertical sun acting in these secluded and stagnant valleys upon the decaying leaves and plants and other detritus of the jungles, the larvæ of insects, etc., must produce in evolving malaria." The land breezes over these spots waft the poison to the city which, being surrounded by a high wall, is hot and unsanitary. When he named insects, he included the mosquito which in this century has been proved to be the bearer of this scourge to man. He saw the remedy without realizing the source of the trouble, as he says after the Americans cleaned and drained the city there was much less fever.

He had the artist's eye for the pleasing or picturesque in the landscape, and many pen cameos are scattered through his pages, but only a few can

appear here. On leaving Puebla he writes this impression of the scene :

“The morning was bright ; and as we passed out into the open plain all nature seemed arrayed in the sweetest smiles of summer—the rains had now fertilized the earth—presenting to our enchanted view green waving fields and richly carpeted meadows, over which were wafted on the morning air the dewy fragrance of the young grass and the perfume of shrub and flower.”

Later on, as the invading band climbs to the top of the ridge, he catches his first glimpse of “the great valley of Mexico. . . . We seemed to be looking upon an immense inland sea surrounded by ranges of stupendous mountains, crested by snow and the clouds. We halted the column for rest and refreshment, and to give all an opportunity of looking upon the promised land. The fog lifted somewhat as we commenced our descent, but still the *coup d' œil* of the valley disappointed us ; not in its grandeur and extent, but from the description of travelers we had been led to suppose that we should be able to take in all the details of the panorama at our first view, which is not the case.”

It was not only nature that he contemplated ; the status of the human family also engaged his atten-

tion, physical as well as sociological. Especially was he susceptible to female loveliness and he always indicated whether the women were handsome or homely. Of the Jalapa women he says :

“Jalapa is celebrated for its pretty women ; but it cannot compare in this respect with any town of the same size in our own country. . . . They want the fairness and freshness of our women. To be sure their soft black eyes . . . and their hair . . . are beautiful features, but nothing can compensate in female beauty for the absence of the lily and the rose.” He granted though that they were “sprightly in conversation, and easy, and eminently graceful in manner,” and these charms can largely make up for deficiency in looks since “a witty and graceful woman may be plain at first sight, but she cannot long remain plain.” He remarked also that “while the women were in general sufficiently robust in figure and well developed, the men were puny and delicate looking. Robust mothers should produce robust children, but the rule does not seem to hold good in Jalapa.” He evidently wrote “children” for “sons.”

“No women,” he continued, “are more kind-hearted or more full of the amiable sensibilities of

the sex than the Mexicans. Perfectly feminine in character, they are indeed the vine to cling round the oak which nature designed the sex to be. They would be shocked at the idea of holding public meetings or discussing in open forum the equal rights of women, as unsexed females sometimes do in other countries.”<sup>1</sup>

He noticed that it was customary for them to ride astride, which was odd to him, though he accepted it as more sensible than to “jeopard the lives of our women whenever we put them on horseback merely for the sake of making them ride differently from the men.” While he could assent to this practice, and could even tolerate cigarette smoking, he drew the line at the young lady in a dance asking her partner for the spit-box; that for him destroyed all “the poetry that hangs around the sex.”

For the women of the lower class he had only pity, as they like the men were a little better off than the beasts they drove. “In the bearing of burdens and other offices of drudgery there was no difference apparent between the women and the men . . . a certain evidence that they had not been in the least degree refined by civilization.

<sup>1</sup>“Service Afloat and Ashore,” p. 269.



. . . Among civilized people, there is a marked distinction between the kinds of labor undertaken by the sexes respectively."

Industrially matters were backward. Mining was mainly carried on by foreigners, and very ineffectively by them. In farming, he saw "the man of two thousand years ago turning up the soil with a yoke of oxen, and with the identical plow described by Virgil." Transportation was scarcely more advanced. Effort had been made to foster manufacturing of cloth through a high tariff, but the agriculturist clamored for a bulwark to shield him from the outsider also ; hence prices for both raw and finished products were exorbitant. A proper tariff might be a benefit to the people because, "from the nature and configuration of the country," the shipment of bulky materials was too laborious and costly, and factories could be established in the interior, in proximity to the raw materials of the farm.

One topic steadily recurred to him—the helots, Indians, peons, or lowest class as contrasted with the Southern slaves. On this same stretch of the journey, in a small village, he was struck with wonder at the "miserable huts filled with an indigent population;" "at the squalor and wretchedness

displayed by these poor people. Princely haciendas arose, like so many Italian villas, . . . giving evidence of luxury and wealth, . . . while the poor helot of an Indian, the hewer of wood and drawer of water . . . scarcely possessed wherewith to cover his nakedness.”<sup>1</sup> “The great majority of Indian laborers on the large haciendas are in a much worse condition than the slaves of our Southern states.” Beyond doubt, he declares, the women with babies “are in an infinitely worse condition than the female slaves on our own Southern plantations, who have masters to feed and take care of their infants.” Finally he noted that “two intelligent slaves, one belonging to General Worth, the other to a member of his staff,” used frequently to compare exultingly their own condition with that of the toiling peons, the free slaves, by whom they were surrounded. They preferred, they said, to be the servants of gentlemen, rather than consort with “poor white trash,” and especially with poor “Indian trash.” How much Semmes may have been influenced by these observations cannot be determined, but in his larger book on the *Sumter* and *Alabama* he treats slavery as a contributory cause of secession. There is absolutely no reason to sup-

<sup>1</sup> “Service Afloat and Ashore,” p. 233.

pose that he would have fought only to preserve that institution.

In more direct ways than general observation or style of expression did this war affect Semmes' views. The case of E. W. Moore led him to a blunt denunciation of promotion by seniority alone. Moore, of Virginia birth, first a midshipman, then lieutenant in the United States Navy, resigned in 1836, and entered the service of the republic of Texas, and with two small vessels routed the Mexican fleet of ten ships, perhaps doing as much as Houston in achieving Texan independence. Later he wanted to return to his former allegiance with his Texas rank, but the navy would not allow this as his years had been spent abroad, and it was insisted that those who remained should have the higher posts by right of seniority. Semmes condemned the view "that a man's years, and not his brains should be the test of promotion and employment." Such a system "dampens hope, stifles talent, cripples energy . . . draws no distinction between excellence and mediocrity but reduces all to the dull and stagnant level of idleness and consequent ignorance and worthlessness."<sup>1</sup>

Of still more practical use to him in after years

<sup>1</sup> "Service Afloat and Ashore," p. 51.

was the example of his senior, Commodore Conner, in passing upon the prizes made in war. As flag-lieutenant Semmes had every facility to learn the judicial aspect of the questions, and beyond doubt he absorbed much that aided him in the cabin of the *Alabama* to solve difficult problems of international usage. Semmes cordially testifies to Conner's "thorough acquaintance with the law of prizes and his discrimination and tact in disposing of cases presented for his decision."

With respect to another feature of naval warfare, this war helped Semmes in the clarification of his ideas, namely, the principles governing privateering. His attitude was clean-cut and positive. The Mexicans wanted to adopt this mode of attack upon American commerce. Semmes frankly admits their right in accordance with the practice and the utterance of civilized nations for centuries. As a policy, also, he contended, it was sensible, for "this system of predatory warfare more than any other equalizes the strength of nations on the water." But Mexico "had no materials whereon to operate," as she had neither military nor commercial marine. "Under the law of nations it was necessary that at least a majority of the officers and crew of each cruiser should be citizens." Otherwise every such

vessel would be a pirate. But, he asserts, even though allowed by the powers, it is "a disreputable mode of warfare under any circumstances." Those engaged in it are fighting more for plunder than patriotism, the crews are composed of the "adventurous and desperate of all nations," and it is almost "impossible that any discipline can be established or maintained among them"; in fact they are little better than "licensed pirates" and the system should be suppressed altogether.<sup>1</sup>

Even the strongest character is liable to shift his point of view when his own ox is gored by his neighbor's bull. In a decade, Semmes was warmly advising privateering as a wise expedient for the South in the imminent Civil War. He wrote to a congressman from that section: "You ask me what I mean by an irregular naval force. I mean a well-organized system of private armed ships called privateers. If you are warred upon at all, it will be by a commercial people, whose ability to do you harm will consist chiefly in ships and shipping. It is at ships and shipping therefore that you must strike; and the most effectual way to do this is by means of the irregular force of which I speak. Private cupidity will always furnish the means for this

<sup>1</sup> "Service Afloat and Ashore," pp. 80-82.

description of warfare, and all that will be required of you will be to put it under sufficient legal restraints to prevent it from degenerating into piracy and becoming an abuse. . . . You could have a large irregular sea-force . . . which could be disbanded without further care or expense at the end of the war.”<sup>1</sup> In both these instances, it is to be remarked that Semmes was unqualifiedly right as to international law providing for privateering, but he was inconsistent when he changed his belief as to the international morality of the practice.

Semmes had the promptings of the philosophical historian and realized that for the proper valuation of the present we must know the past. He adopted this attitude in Mexico and unconsciously widened his own vision.

He skilfully pointed out that the key to the right understanding of Mexican affairs was the transfer of the feudal system from the Old World to Mexico by the Spanish conquerors. The leaders parceled out the territory among themselves and their subordinates, “and along with those lands the simple Indians who inhabited them,” while the Church at the same time came into possession of vast tracts. Under the system of entail these private holdings

<sup>1</sup> “Sumter and Alabama,” p. 92.

passed from father to son and built up an aristocracy that, leaving their estates in the hands of agents, congregated in the cities, spent "their incomes in follies and frivolities," hung around the court of the viceroy, and aided in upholding "the despotism under which they lived."

Their predial partners, the clergy, were not at all alike in sentiment. There were at least three classes. The higher one, the bishops, were as a rule "men of exemplary character. Being large property holders, occupying, socially, a superior position, and standing at the head of a provincial hierarchy, it is quite natural that they should be eminently conservative in their politics; their conservatism running sometimes into democracy."<sup>1</sup> The second class are mostly natives, with only limited incomes, doing all the drudgery of the church, jealous of "the enjoyments and privileges" of their brethren above them, sharing the views of the mass around them, exercising much influence, and being usually "good republicans." The remaining division, "called the regular clergy, consists of monks of the various religious orders." They were the missionaries of Mexico to propagate Christianity among the Indians. Having been superseded in this function by the

<sup>1</sup> "Service Afloat and Ashore," p. 14.

curates, they have become "a separate and distinct organization, . . . having little or no sympathy with the mass of the native population. . . . Being possessed of considerable revenues they lead a life of indolence and ease. . . . They are, in consequence, held in but little esteem, and exert no influence except such as flows naturally from their property. . . . As a social and political element they are of but little weight."

With all this difference of attitude toward government and society, with envy over the gradations of rank, with disparity of wealth and income, with diversity of ideals, all painted so vividly, Semmes' conclusion that "much of the influence the clergy might otherwise exert is destroyed by neutralizing elements existing within its own body" seems unassailable.

The other inhabitants, five-sixths of the total, a class without property, are largely a "mongrel stock," a mixture of Indian and African blood. They form almost another race, having but slight affinity with the ruling class. "They do not possess the intelligence of the Southern negro," and the great majority of them are "servile and abject in the extreme, devoid of intelligence and debased in morals." They are substantially serfs in the rural regions,



and artisans in the cities. The latter, though better paid, remain in the same state of degradation, "imitating the depravity of the upper classes," having the vices of civilization without the virtues. There are also smaller fractions,—miners, burden-bearers, and vagabonds, none elevated mentally, all low morally, and some vicious and dangerous.

In this unhappy land there was also a passion for military display and fame. For years all the civil pursuits were neglected and then despised by the ambitious, during the turbulent years of the revolutionary era. After that time it was impossible to settle down to a peaceful existence for more than a short while. Commotion followed commotion, due to the intrigues and disappointments of desperate and defeated leaders. Every upheaval had been a heavy cost to be saddled eventually on the entire structure. Debts were piled up and taxation became a deadly weight. Rascality and graft were rampant, since every official had to have a share of what passed under his control.

Semmes tersely concludes that "two distinct races . . . possess the soil; and that these races are divided into many classes; of very different degrees of intelligence; of various political creeds; and of many and conflicting interests." The observer of

the scene will note "a union of Church and State . . . an unequal division of property, and an overweening military establishment. As a consequence . . . of these discordant elements, he has witnessed revolutions and civil wars . . . the wreck of the public prosperity and the utter demoralization of the people . . . a decaying commerce and a rude state of agriculture and the arts . . . the corruption of public men and the general absence of sincerity and good faith among the masses." He will have a clue to "unravel the mystery of the astonishing defeats of the Mexican army."<sup>1</sup>

Reflecting upon these unlucky circumstances with reference to Mexico, and the nearness of the virile, aggressive race of his native land, Semmes was at this stage of his career an expansionist of the most advanced sort, but a peaceful one if possible. He thought that, had it not been for the internal dissensions in Mexico bringing on a series of untoward political events, with little doubt, "harmony, to a greater or less extent, would have been preserved; and probably, in a generation or two, the radical differences of the two races would entirely have disappeared . . . the flaxen hair and blue eyes of

<sup>1</sup> "Service Afloat and Ashore," p. 40.

the Anglo-Saxon taking a darker shade, and more brilliant light, from the Hispano-American. We should thus have conquered Texas . . . and ultimately Mexico . . . as Greece conquered Rome, by civilization and the arts, instead of the sword."

Semmes relates an incident of the war that doubtless for him strengthened the foundation of his glittering edifice of expansion. The peninsula of Yucatan was held to Mexico by very loose ties, and setting up a separate government she sent an ambassador to Washington. No decision was reached as to the international status of the new state, but a squadron of vessels took possession of the main port and held it until peace was declared. So humanely were the inhabitants treated that they petitioned the navy to direct affairs until complete tranquillity could be restored. Semmes himself was convinced that if the United States had entertained the desire to annex the whole peninsula of Yucatan, there would scarcely have been a dissenting voice among the inhabitants. Our institutions found worthy representatives in our naval officers; and "they became as popular in Yucatan after an administration of eighteen months as our people are destined in time to become over the whole American continent."

In keeping with this generosity of view, Semmes did not find the cause of the war with Mexico to lie in the "pretty theater of events on which the fleeting generations of politicians play hide-and-seek. The passage of our race into Texas, New Mexico and California was but the first step in that great movement southward which forms a part of our destiny. An all-wise Providence has placed us in juxtaposition with an inferior people, in order, without doubt, that we may sweep over them, and remove them (as a people) and their worn-out institutions from the face of the earth. We are the northern hordes of the Alani, spreading ourselves over fairer and sunnier fields, and carrying along with us, besides the newness of life, and the energy and courage of our prototypes, letters, arts, and civilization."

This idea of "manifest destiny" is down deep in Semmes' soul, and later, he comes to the same point with clear, strong language. "Time with his scythe and hour glass had brought another and a newer race, to sweep away the mouldered and mouldering institutions of a worn-out people, and replace them with a fresher and more vigorous civilization. The descendant of the Dane and the Saxon, with progress inscribed on his helmet, had come to sup-

plant the never-changing Visigoth in his halls, and to claim that superiority for his lineage which an all-wise Providence has so indelibly stamped upon it.”

In these prophetic revelations Semmes may have had in mind the dream of the slavocrats, of getting room for future growth so as to maintain a balance between the slave and the free states, but he hardly more than mentions this institution throughout these pages. At any rate his sure insight is matched by that of one of America's greatest writers, the dean of the transcendental school of literature, who certainly desired no blessing for the South in his flash of inspiration. Emerson, in New England in 1844, seven years before the date of Semmes' book, penned in his diary : “The question of the annexation of Texas is one of those which look very differently to the centuries and to the years. It is very certain that the strong British race, which have now overrun so much of this continent, must also overrun that tract, and Mexico and Oregon also ; and it will, in the course of ages, be of small import by what particular occasions and methods it was done.”<sup>1</sup>

It was neither the bluster of imperialism nor the

<sup>1</sup> Cabot, “Memoirs of Emerson,” Vol. II, p. 576.

enthusiasm of ignorance that actuated Semmes in these deliverances or beliefs. As became a profound student of law, municipal, constitutional, and international, Semmes had considered the possible evil consequences of enlarging our domain, and he was confident that the political vehicle that had borne the country in safety thus far would serenely carry us to any limits. To him there was no danger of such weakening and dissolution as befell the Roman Empire and the empires of Alexander and other eastern leaders. These went to pieces of their own weight through loss of cohesion with enlargement of boundaries. But the more we spread, the firmer our bond of union. They were based on centrality of power, while we thrive on the federative principle. With them "extension of system beyond certain limits is unquestionably death," but with us "extension is life. For while the Federal executive power, unlike the central power of which we have been speaking, is rather strengthened than weakened by the extension, the individual importance of the states is diminished. Without losing any portion of their qualified sovereignty, they become less capable, either single or in combination with others, to disturb the harmony of the system. In the old confederacy of thirteen, New York, in combination

with one or two of the large states, could effectually have destroyed the smaller ones; but where the federative system shall extend over fifty or a hundred states, there can be no *empire states* to exercise a predominating influence over the rest.”<sup>1</sup>

Semmes not only could see no peril in widening our borders, but he said that “the salvation of our institutions depends, in a great degree, upon a reasonable extension of our limits. This is the only thing that will rob faction of its bitterness, if it does not entirely destroy it. Fanaticism, whether religious, political or social, is always local; it never spreads, unless, indeed, it be spread as the great Arabian enthusiast spread his faith, by the sword. And the reason it does not spread is that it is error; and error, although it may be contagious in small districts, like the plague, can never inundate a vast country.” He held that because of our size, stretching from ocean to ocean, a puny outburst of discontent in one spot was dissipated into thin vapor before it could affect any considerable area. Massachusetts was imposing when there were only thirteen commonwealths, but let that number increase to “thirty, forty, fifty, or a hundred,” and her anger or resentment is powerless. “Individual

<sup>1</sup> “Service Afloat and Ashore,” p. 474.

states will become less and less important, and local jealousies and heart-burnings will scarcely produce more effect upon the nation at large than does the gossiping of a remote village upon a metropolitan city." Shay's rebellion in Pennsylvania and the whiskey trouble in Massachusetts would be now no more than "tempests in a teapot." With greater diversity of "climates, productions and pursuits," there will be more motives for adhesion, making all more dependent on each other and binding the whole "in one great free-trades' union." With the contemplation of the beneficent fruits of augmentation on the federative plan, Semmes is not only a pronounced nationalist, but he becomes a world commercialist and forecasts for us supremacy in the trade of the earth. "Our Pacific front opens to us, and will enable us to monopolize, almost all the commerce of the East Indies, north and south. This will make us the carriers and factors of the world. Twenty years hence, and it will no longer be Britannia but America rules the waves."<sup>1</sup>

The same idea had filled Semmes' mind when he crossed the divide between the two oceans on his mission to propose the exchange of Passed Midshipman Rogers. He first saw the water flowing toward

<sup>1</sup> "Service Afloat and Ashore," p. 55.



the Pacific and “many were the reflections to which it gave rise. Our small navy on that side of the continent under the lead of the gallant Commodore Stockton, aided by Colonel Frémont, had already added the Californias to our vast domain, and our flag would no doubt soon encircle the globe as that of the greatest commercial nation on earth, that same flag which had been derided scarce forty years before—in the War of 1812—by our proud ancestor over the water as a “‘bit of striped bunting.’”

His optimism and patriotism made the future seem bright to him. Such single-minded devotion to the Union blinded the eyes of the prophet and caused his predictions to be so wide of the mark that they would be amusing to us, if they did not call up lamentable emotions. Writing only ten years before the clash of arms, he detected no signs of the coming storm. Reasoning soundly that no one state could seriously jeopardize the other states, it did not occur to him that a group of them, with the same incentive, could imperil the entire fabric. Fondly anticipating that the American flag would wave over the “salt blue seas,” it is a tragedy of the imagination that in fifteen years his daring genius was to be in the van, driving that emblem from the face of the waters.

## CHAPTER V

### FROM THE MEXICAN TO THE CIVIL WAR

WITHOUT a glimmer of his coming destiny, Semmes serenely bore aloft that insignia that he was so soon fated to strike down. During the interval he served as inspector, commanded the *Electra* for some five months, and also the *Flirt* for a less time, both in Southern waters.

It was on the latter that we see something of that determination to maintain discipline which made him complete master of the *Alabama* in the presence of a heterogeneous mass of reckless, desperate men, hailing from all quarters of the globe. His log has many entries like these: " Punished George McGowan with one dozen of the cats for disorderly conduct on shore and James Sergeant with the same for drunkenness." " Punished John Travers with nine lashes with the cats for refusing to obey the surgeon's steward when ordered to assist a sick messmate." In forty-two days he administered sixteen whippings with the cats ranging from two lashes to twelve, besides sentencing to irons and double irons.

He was of course only making use of the regular means then universally employed for preserving order. When he was a subordinate several years previous on the *Porpoise*, he had made this record: "At 9:10 called all hands to witness punishment, and punished the following men, by order of Lieut-Commdg. W. E. Hunt; John Stone (Bo. Mate) for drunkenness and insubordination, six lashes; Austin Daniels (quartermaster) for drunkenness and insolence, twelve lashes; John Smith (Captain Cook) drunkenness, twelve lashes; Edward B. Carmer (yeoman) for drunkenness and fighting, twelve lashes; and John Walker for drunkenness and fighting, twelve lashes—all with the cats."<sup>1</sup> This method of restraining offenders was abolished in 1850. Semmes made his world-startling cruises in the *Sumter* and *Alabama* without resorting to this cruel physical device to hold his sway over the crew.

After leaving the *Flirt* he was on waiting orders for about five years, which he spent in southern Alabama, chiefly in Mobile, enlarging his acquaintance with the law. He was promoted to be a commander in 1855, and the next year was assigned to lighthouse work in which service he continued as

<sup>1</sup>From log books of these vessels in Navy Department.

inspector, as secretary, and as member of the Board till his resignation from the navy to cast his fortunes with the South on February 15, 1861.

To a sincere soul, it was a terrible wrench to take this step. Considerations of selfishness and considerations of sentiment were all against it. If he withdrew, he dropped his profession which was his fortune and his future. His family was dependent on him. If he remained where he was, he was sure of a competency for life, and he could count on promotion and honors. If he went with his state, he could not better his condition, and if the venture failed, he lost all. If the severance of these economic bonds cost many an anguish, it was still more painful to break the ties of association and comradeship. Naval officers who "had been rocked together in the same storm, and had escaped perhaps from the same shipwreck, found it very difficult to draw their swords against each other." There was, too, a cluster of the tenderest memories around the flag which represented a voluntary union of sovereign states, built on the principle that all government should rest upon the consent of the governed, but now it was to be the emblem for coercing unwilling states "to remain under a government which they deemed unjust and oppressive."

But all those various emotions Semmes felt could not be better expressed than in the two simple, dignified letters that General Lee penned when he followed Virginia out of the Union. Semmes includes them in his fascinating story of the *Sumter* and *Alabama*. But the inherent regard for law of the bulk of Americans was in Semmes' case strengthened by his legal training, and in after years it prompted him to a keen analysis, historically and constitutionally, of the grounds of justification of secession.

To him "the judgment which posterity will form upon our actions will depend mainly upon the answers which we may be able to give to two questions: First, had the South the right to dissolve the compact of government under which it had lived with the North? and secondly, was there sufficient reason for such dissolution?" The act of revolution had no part in the discussion because it is in-born in the people to desert a rule that has become too aggressive for endurance. But with the South it was a higher right they exercised, because the states had formed the agreement and therefore as sovereignties they could unmake it. The old loose confederation of the thirteen colonies was by the confession of all formed by the spontaneous action

of the thirteen, each moving independently. When they saw that organization was no longer useful, they broke it up, and then each, on its own incentive, adopted the present Constitution of the United States. Or as Semmes summed it up: "A convention of the states assembled with powers only to amend the Constitution; instead of doing which, it abolished the old form of government altogether, and recommended a new one, and no one complained. As each state formally and deliberately adopted the new government, it as formally and deliberately seceded from the old one; and yet no one heard any talk of a breach of faith, and still less of treason."

But it is asserted by the North that the Constitution of the United States "is a very different thing from the Articles of Confederation. It was formed, not only by the states, but by the people of the United States in the aggregate, and made all the states one people, one government. It is not a compact, or a league, between the states, but an instrument under which they have surrendered irrevocably their sovereignty. Under it the Federal government has become the paramount authority and the state subordinate to it."

Even the strongest advocates of this contention,

Webster and Story, frankly admit that if the union of the states was a compact then the states are wholly justified in seceding whenever they desire, even though, as Webster admits, "it might be one of its stipulations that it should be perpetual."

Of course, Semmes says, there is such an act as a state merger, in which a state gives up its own life and is absorbed in that of another, and in such case the one "parting with its sovereignty could never reclaim it by peaceable means." But a historical retrospect shows overwhelmingly that the states had no intention of laying aside more than a portion of their sovereignty, which they delegated to a common agent. The Journal of the debates in the constitutional convention convinces any fair mind how jealous all were to guard their absolute power of action except the fraction they intrusted to the central authority. So scrupulous were they on this point that several of them declared their meaning in the most express manner. Both sections so rigidly insisted on this that the tenth amendment was adopted to make certain that all powers except those enumerated in the Constitution should remain with the states. New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, Virginia, and North Carolina occupied substantially the same ground.

Throughout the entire movement to create this general authority, it was the states that took each step, and not the people. The delegates were appointed and empowered by the states, they voted always by states, and their labors were passed upon by the states, not in any of these instances by the people as a whole. It was the states that created this instrument supreme so far as its terms permit, and they can destroy it—"any one of them may destroy it as to herself; it may withdraw from the compact at pleasure, with or without reason."

But the opponents argue that the preamble reads, "We, the people of the United States," etc., thus establishing that it was not the thirteen separate entities, but the persons inhabiting this land that entered into the compact. To Semmes this is the merest "literary quackery and legerdemain of words," made respectable and imposing by Webster and Story, who practiced in good faith a "literary and historical fraud" upon credulity and simplicity. Webster is more responsible, perhaps, than any other man. He boldly stated "in his celebrated speech in the Senate, in 1833, in reply to Mr. Calhoun" that "the Constitution itself, in its very front, declares that it was ordained and established by the people of the United States in the aggregate."



This has been the foundation of all the Northern constitutional lawyers, but “unfortunately for him and his followers he has *misstated a fact* ;” this is not true, and the preamble did not “*mean to assert* that it was true. The great names of Webster and Story have been lent to a palpable falsification of history, and as a result of that falsification, a great war has ensued, which has sacrificed its hecatomb of victims, and desolated and nearly destroyed an entire people.”

But we must strip off the disguises from these “word-mongers” and we shall get at the truth. “In the original draft of the Constitution, the states, by name, were mentioned, as had been done in the Articles of Confederation. The states had formed the old confederation, the states were equally forming the new confederation ; hence the convention naturally followed in this preamble the form which had been set them in the old Constitution, or Articles. This preamble, purporting that the work of forming the new government was being done by the states, remained at the head of the instrument *during all the deliberations of the convention*, and no one member ever objected to it. It expressed a fact which no one thought of denying. It is thus a fact beyond question, not only that the Constitution was

framed by the states, but that the convention so proclaimed in '*front of the instrument.*' "

It is thus clear enough that it was framed by the states, but was it adopted by them or by the people? At least twice in the convention it was attempted to have the matter referred to a convention of the entire country; but there was not even a second for one motion, and the other one was voted down, even though it was fathered by Madison. All having agreed that the instrument should be referred to the states, "there were differences of opinion as to how the states should act upon it," whether by the legislature of each state or whether by a convention specially called in each state; and the latter view prevailed.

When the document was finally completed, it was handed over to the "committee on style" to prune into a consistent shape. These gentlemen were instantly confronted with the problem in the preamble of the thirteen names. It was impossible to designate those, as no one knew how many would vote for the ratification. Nine was the minimum number, but no one could tell which they would be. Furthermore it had been already determined that the states should speak through conventions of the people and not through legislatures; it was expedient

to get that idea in the revision also. To meet these two new demands upon the phraseology of the instrument, the Committee on Style adopted the expression : " We, the people of the United States," —meaning, as every one must see, " We, the people of the several states united by this instrument."

After the members had dispersed to their homes, and argument against their labor had to be met, there is additional testimony that the preamble did not bear the construction put on it by Webster and his followers. There was hesitation in Virginia, and violent assaults by that wonderful orator, Patrick Henry, on this particular phrase at the beginning of the Constitution. Madison, who has been styled the Father of the Constitution, met his attack and allayed the fears by declaring that the parties to the Constitution " were the people, not the people as composing one great society, but the people as composing thirteen sovereignties. If it were a consolidated government the assent of a majority of the people would be sufficient to establish it. But it was to be binding on the people of a state only by their own separate consent." After this calm assurance there was nothing to be done by Virginia except to adopt the instrument.

But another stumbling-block for Webster's interpretation is Alexander Hamilton, who did not "believe much in republics ; and least of all did he believe in federal republics." He knew what the states wanted and he knew that the federal form had been established. His evidence, therefore, is all the more significant because he is "an unwilling but an honest witness." In the *Federalist* he uses the terms "the compacts," "concurrence of thirteen states," "independent states," and "parties to the compact ;" in fact "he speaks only of states, and of compacts to be made by states."

To Semmes the whole trouble between the North and South seemed to rest upon that phrase in the preamble, and it is deserving of all the space he has given it ; but this recourse to contemporary history was scarcely necessary, because, he continues, "the Constitution itself settles the whole controversy." The seventh article of that instrument reads as follows : "The ratification of the conventions of nine states shall be sufficient for the establishment of the Constitution between the states so ratifying the same." The Websterian view of the preamble certainly cannot be reconciled with this "short, explicit and unambiguous provision," so there is but one conclusion possible : that the preamble meant

the people as represented in the state conventions, rather than in the legislatures.

It is thus undeniable that at the beginning of the new government, all understood the Constitution as only a compact, and it is just as clear that this view monopolized the political field for forty years. Thomas Jefferson, who penned the Kentucky Resolutions, was an unmistakable secessionist, and in the first of that famous series of statements styled the Union as a "compact" of limited and defined powers. Further on he said, "as in all cases of compact among persons having no common judge, each party has an equal right to judge for itself, as well of infractions, as of the mode and measure of redress." After John Adams, down to Jackson's day all parties advocated states' rights.

New England was outspoken in defense of this tenet of faith. Some of the representatives from that section were bitterly opposed to the Louisiana Purchase, regarding it as really a dissolution of the Union. Later, in the War of 1812, the discontent culminated in the Hartford Convention, whose journal is replete with "sound constitutional doctrines," referring to the government of the country as a "compact" between the states, and formally declaring that, in emergencies, "states, which have

no common umpire, must be their own judges and execute their own decisions." Then why did this change of feeling take "place in that section," so that those two giants, Webster and Story, undertook "the herculean task" of falsifying all the history of the preceding forty years? It was solely on account of the protective tariff which was to touch that group of states with the "enchanter's wand" and make it "glad with the music of the spindle and the shuttle."

From this chain of reasoning Semmes could see no escape. Hence secession, so far from being treason, was a sacred duty devolving upon a state when her rights were infringed upon. The government was the creature of the states and had absolutely no powers but those the states granted it. The power of secession was never delegated because that would have been a merger of their sovereignty, and for no instant did they ever contemplate such suicide.

Semmes gathers up all these threads: "I have given a brief outline of the history and formation of the Federal Constitution, proving by abundant references to the Fathers and to the instrument itself that it was the intention of the former to draft and that they did draft a *federal compact* of government, which compact was ordained and estab-

lished by the states in their sovereign capacity, and not by the people of the United States in the aggregate as one nation. It resulted from this statement of the question that the states had the legal and constitutional right to withdraw from the compact at pleasure without reference to any cause of quarrel."

But having this inherent right, the question remains as to whether the South had sufficient ground for dissolving the connection. There were four causes, any one of which Semmes holds made this separation inevitable.

First, came the innate dissimilarity between the people of the Northern and Southern states. "Virginia and Massachusetts were the two original germs from which the great majority of the American populations had sprung ; and no two peoples, speaking the same language and coming from the same country, could have been more dissimilar in education, taste, and habits, and even in natural instincts, than were the adventurers that settled these two colonies." To Virginia came the "gay and dashing cavaliers," the element that afterward espoused the side of the two Charleses, while the Massachusetts immigrants were of the stock from which were moulded the Praise-God Barebones Parliament of

Cromwell. The two groups seem to have had an instinctive repugnance to one another. Each attracted its own kind from the mother island, and two civilizations slowly unfolded.

A second cause is closely connected with the first, namely, natural environment. "The two countries were different in climate and physical features—the climate of the one being cold and inhospitable and its soil rugged and sterile, whilst the climate of the other was soft and genial and its soil generous and fruitful. As a result of these differences of climate and soil, the pursuits of the two peoples became different, the one being driven to the ocean and the mechanic arts for subsistence, and the other betaking itself to agriculture."

A third impulse came from the tariff, which, beginning in 1816 with incidental protection, soon rose to the demand of "protection for the sake of protection." It was simply a game of spoliation so far as the South was concerned. This "wholesale robbery" worked "by the simple process of eternally taking away from the South and returning nothing to it." Under this system mortgages were increasing in the South, and the planter was sinking to the status of a mere overseer for Northern merchants. The South supplied nearly all the ex-



portations, and then furnished the means for dotting "the picturesque hills of New England with costly mansions."

A fourth cause was the attitude of the North on the subject of slavery, not on moral or religious grounds, but because the institution seemed to stand "in the way of their struggle for empire." Under this incitement they had pushed the Missouri Compromise through Congress in 1820, forbidding slavery north of a certain parallel, a palpable wrong to the South and a violation of the Constitution. Each section had as much right in the territories as the other and it was a discrimination to permit the Northerner to take his property there, while denying that privilege to the Southerner. Later, toward the middle of the century, this injustice had been remedied by the repeal of the Compromise, but this step was very distasteful to the North, as it was not in keeping with their ideas of dominion for any more slave states to be formed. Matters advanced further when the Republican party convention inserted a plank in their platform absolutely forbidding slavery in the territories.

Allied with this, and possibly of a still more disturbing nature, was the persistent refusal of the Northern states to comply with the terms of the

Fugitive Slave Law, and return runaways to their masters. Even Webster had roundly condemned this lapse from the faith, and declared that "a bargain broken on one side is broken on all sides." On top of the fierce agitation on both these lines came the election of Lincoln, "a purely geographical" choice, and "tantamount to a denial of the co-equality of the Southern states with the Northern states in the Union, since it drove the former out of the common territories." Still some of the Southern states were patient and hopeful, and sought to ward off the catastrophe with some sort of compromise, but Congress treated the convention with contempt. The "Northern faction," triumphant in both houses, "was arrayed in a solid phalanx of hostility to the South and could not be moved an inch." The Puritans, "rebels when in a minority, had become tyrants now when in a majority." The South could only take up the gauntlet which had been thrown at her feet.

Such is a brief summary of the long, acute, analytical, and historical argument that Semmes put up in justification of secession. In places, unconsciously to himself, his feelings override his intention, his tone takes on the bitterness of many men of his class, and he becomes illogical or incon-

sistent. In one place he says, "the civilization of the North was coarse and practical, that of the South was more intellectual and refined," because the North had neither "the requisite leisure, nor the requisite wealth, to bring about a very refined system of civilization;" yet two pages farther on he laments that the protective tariff was impoverishing the South and piling up Northern opulence.

As to difference of race or people in the two sections, one Cavalier and the other Puritan, here again, instead of following his own independent judgment, he accepted the current utterances. Puritanism is a matter of temperament, not of geography or of blood. If for a moment he had considered Stonewall Jackson, whom he much admired, he would have seen that this type was developed South as well as North. Still he is not too much to blame in this connection, as only of late years has there been a thorough demolition of this colonial myth.

Aside from such errors, though, Semmes' stand that historically secession was entirely right is impregnable. At the time of the adoption of the Constitution and for about a score of years afterward, it was in all men's minds that it was the work of the sovereign states and that each state was

at perfect liberty under the scheme to withdraw at any time she chose. This is unqualifiedly admitted at present by investigators of the first rank. It is necessary to quote only one. Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, from Massachusetts, in his biography of Webster, in discussing the famous reply to Hayne, says: "When the Constitution was adopted by the votes of states at Philadelphia, and accepted by the votes of states in popular conventions, it is safe to say that there was not a man in the country, from Washington and Hamilton on the one side to George Clinton and George Mason on the other, who regarded the new system as anything but an experiment entered upon by the states and from which each and every state had the right peaceably to withdraw, a right which was very likely to be exercised."<sup>1</sup>

Of course the sad, awful mistake of Semmes and other keen thinkers along this line was the failure to see that all the conditions had been transformed during those three-score years. A secession at the start would have been hardly more than for a man to cast off a glove from his right hand, but a secession in 1860 was the amputation of the whole arm. It was only natural that the patient should object, and that the logical fallacy should be atoned for in blood.

<sup>1</sup> Page 176.

## CHAPTER VI

### GETTING OFF WITH THE "SUMTER"

FAITHFUL to the states' rights dogma, wedded to the secession theory, fortified with the historical argument, the South sprang to the conflict with the most abounding confidence. They had no doubt as to the justice of their cause, they had no fear as to the outcome. Materially and humanly the odds seemed all against them, but they did not stop to balance chances. Their spirits were afire, and they scorned the deductions from the facts or the teachings from the figures. It mattered not to them that all the apparatus of government remained in the hands of their opponents, that all the munitions of war were in the same possession, that virtually all the mills were in the same quarter.

In the South were two shipyards, at Norfolk and Pensacola, both soon to be lost. There were three rolling mills, one in Alabama, and two in Tennessee. The one foundry for heavy work was in Richmond. A little machinery, insignificant smelting works, scattered factories, comprised the remainder

of the mechanical equipment that the South had at hand to achieve her Titanic task. Nor had she the trained men to handle any larger equipment. Besides, the small number she had were liable to be drafted for the field.

On the human side, she was filled with a population enthusiastic for land warfare, but for fighting upon the water there was no sailor constituency except the few thousands in the river and coastwise service. Of trained leaders for these, the dearth was painful, beyond the occasional officers bred in the United States Navy that followed their states in spite of the pangs it caused them to do so.

With the lumber standing in the forests, with the minerals underground, the prospect would have appalled any but the stoutest heart, yet a navy was built that did valiant deeds. In the coastal cities and along the rivers, the clang of the hammers and the whirring of wheels were soon heard; considering the odds against them, the Navy Department rapidly launched all sorts of craft, rams, cruisers, side-wheelers, propellers, and in time iron-clads. In the last class, the *Merrimac* helped to point the path toward metal vessels for all the world. In submarines, the Confederacy gave an instance of effective action—the sinking of the U. S. *Housatonic*

in the harbor of Charleston, S. C., by one of these submerged agents.

The disparity between the foes was preponderating at the outbreak of the war and became still greater with the years. The authorities at Washington began the conflict with nearly a hundred boats, 1,500 officers, 7,500 seamen, and closed with about 600 vessels, 9,000 officers and over 50,000 seamen. The Confederacy began with almost nothing in all these respects.

None more clearly than Semmes knew all these drawbacks, none more accurately noted these deficiencies, but none more unfalteringly chose the line of duty as he saw it. Early in 1861, he had made up his mind, and there was a test of his staying power one evening when he called on one of the Alabama senators to announce his decision. A brother officer was there, also Southern, but Semmes, not knowing what his sentiments were, could not speak of his purpose until the other had left. He seemed to want to outsit Semmes, and both remained till midnight, when the other got weary of the waiting and left.<sup>1</sup>

On February 14, 1861, as he was seated in his family circle in Washington, a telegram came re-

<sup>1</sup> "Belle of the Fifties," p. 144.

questing his presence in Montgomery for consultation with the Committee on Naval Affairs. In a few minutes his reply was flashed back that he would come at once. The next day with all formality and courtesy he sent in his resignation from the Navy and from the Lighthouse Board. The same day came to him the acceptance of the first, but no notice ever reached him as to the second because, as he concluded, two of the other members were from the South but were "too loyal to their places to follow the lead of their states." It was a matter of pride with him that all these steps were taken so openly and frankly, with no concealment whatever, and hence subsequent talk of treason and desertion was wholly baseless.

But a man with his depth of conviction, with his power of reflection, could hardly turn aside from the course that he had pursued for a third of a century, without being stirred to his heart's core. His feelings reached a climax the night before he got to his destination, as the train rolled through a burning forest. The blaze and the occasion and the place all conspired to influence his reveries :—"The pine woods were on fire as we passed through them, the flames now and then running up a lightwood tree, and throwing a weird and



fitful glare upon the passing train. The scene was peculiarly Southern and reminded me that I was drawing near my home and my people, and I mechanically repeated to myself the words of the poet :

“ ‘ Breathes there a man with soul so dead  
Who never to himself hath said  
This is my own, my native land.’ ”

And my heart, which up to that moment had felt as though a heavy weight were pressing upon it, began to give more vigorous beats and send a more inspiring current through my veins. Under this happy influence, I sank, as the night advanced and the train thundered on, into the first sound sleep which had visited my weary eyelids since I had resigned my commission. . . . This night ride through the burning pine woods of Alabama afterward stood as a great gulf in my memory, forming an impassable barrier, as it were, between my past and my future life. . . . When I washed and dressed for breakfast in Montgomery the next morning I had put off the old man and put on the new. The labors and associations of a lifetime had been inscribed in a volume which had been closed, and a new book, whose pages were as yet all blank, had been opened.”

But Semmes' dreams never interfered with his

activities ; they apparently gave him extra onset. The committee got his views, and later Davis, the provisional president, chose him for an important errand northward. There was outlined for him onerous and grave work,—to purchase machinery and munitions, arms and powder, learn processes, gather information, and secure skilled labor. As Semmes doubtless explained to Davis, the South did not have even enough percussion caps to fight one battle.

He was soon back in Washington, visiting the arsenal, and conferring with mechanics. He saw the crowds on Pennsylvania Avenue witnessing the inaugural procession, but he delayed not, continued to New York and made a tour of the chief workshops in that state, Connecticut, and Massachusetts. There were no obstacles before his feet ; all were ready to receive him and to sell to him all he cared to pay cash for. Further responsibility was placed upon him by instructions from the Confederate Secretary of the Navy to search for steamers strong enough to carry at least one gun, but of draft light enough to navigate shallow coastal waters, and to do this without exciting suspicion. He was not able to find any, though he diligently looked through the New York harbor.

The skies were now getting portentous, and he took passage for a Southern port and arrived in Montgomery early in April, to be put in charge of the Lighthouse Bureau. Scarcely had he appointed some clerks and opened a set of books, when Sumter was fired upon, and the whole land, both sides, burst into war flame. He was not the man to sit at a desk when he could wield a sword in defense of his principles and of his state. At his age of fifty-two, he knew he had passed the prime of physical life, but his constitution was still unimpaired. He instantly expressed a desire to go to sea and harass the enemy's commerce, and thus weaken him at a vital point, since "wealth is necessary to the conduct of all modern wars." There was a phalanx of merchant sail second only to Great Britain's in magnitude and importance. Semmes had his eye on this mighty fleet.

In the interview with the Secretary of the Navy, S. R. Mallory, Semmes enlarged upon his favorite theory of attacking the foe, and received the endorsement of his superior. But the trouble was to get the right sort of boat for that venture. A board of naval experts was already examining various ships, but could make only discouraging reports, and the Secretary handed him one that had come

in that morning. Semmes read the description of a "small propeller steamer, of five hundred tons' burthen, seagoing, with a low-pressure engine, sound and capable of being so strengthened as to be able to carry an ordinary battery of four or five guns," with a speed of nine or ten knots, but space for only five days' fuel, without "accommodations for the crew of a ship of war." Although Semmes saw she had been condemned, he said to the Secretary: "Give me that ship; I think I can make her answer the purpose."

It was done, and in this quick, decisive manner did Raphael Semmes make the decision that was finally to write his name high among the world's naval heroes of all time. Thus was chosen the *Sumter*, the first "ship of war" to fly the new Confederate flag on the high seas.

The next day Semmes' orders were handed him; that afternoon, after bidding his official associates farewell, he embarked for Mobile, and on the fourth day he was in New Orleans,—truly, for dashing movement, a Stonewall Jackson of the seas.

In another way he was similar to Jackson. Both showed qualities and resources that their associates for years had never discovered a trace of. Semmes' daring, his skill, his energy, were all a marvel

to his former colleagues. According to Admiral Porter, who on the other side had such notable achievements to his credit, Semmes, in the old navy, "had little reputation as an officer. He had no particular taste for his profession, but had a fondness for literature, and was a good talker and writer. . . . He was indolent and fond of his comfort, so that altogether his associates in the navy gave him credit for very little energy. What was then the astonishment of his old companions to find that Semmes was pursuing a course that required the greatest skill and vigor; for there never was a naval commander who in so short a time committed such depredations on an enemy's commerce, or who so successfully eluded the vessels sent in pursuit of him up to the time of the sinking of the *Alabama*." <sup>1</sup>

Again Porter says: "Although he had served many years in the United States Navy, none of his associates ever supposed that in time of war he would exhibit so much efficiency; for although his courage was undoubted, his tastes were rather those of the scholar than of the dashing naval officer and destroyer of commerce." "From being the mildest-mannered man in the navy," he assumed a "character bordering on that of an ancient vi-

<sup>1</sup> "Nav. Hist. Civ. War," p. 602.

king." "Burning ships became a passion, and if ever a man had the bump of destructiveness on his cranium, that man was Raphael Semmes." Porter considers that he was the most vindictive of all the officers of the Confederate navy, but in this misjudges Semmes' motive entirely. His purpose was the same as that of all soldiers on land when they burn captured supplies that they cannot take away for their own consumption. Sherman's object was not mere revenge when he destroyed railroads and bridges in Georgia and elsewhere. Wealth, as Semmes urged and rightly too, is a necessity in modern wars, both on land and water. It is a part of the game to weaken the adversary by demolishing his means.

For this function of annihilation Semmes turned out to be the very man the Confederacy needed, as he had "no doubts of success . . . and no fear of the consequences." The inertness he had displayed while in the United States Navy had disappeared; he had become a new man. As Semmes himself had realized the morning he arrived in Montgomery, his previous life was a closed book, and a new volume, all blank at the start, had been opened.

He had need, too, of all the buoyancy that a

youthful vitality could bring. Only fresh vigor and determination could remove the impediments in front of him. In former years on such an occasion he had only to "go into a navy yard, with well-provided workshops and skilled workmen ready with all the requisite materials at hand to execute" his orders. But now "everything had to be improvised, from the manufacture of a water tank to the 'kids and cans' of the berth deck messes, and from a gun carriage to a friction primer." He had to formulate the plans, make the drawings and supervise alterations. The deck had to be strengthened, a supplementary one put in, engines protected, rigging transformed, cabins arranged for officers, outfit procured for crew, gun carriages constructed at his own direction for guns at Norfolk, shot and shell cast, a corps of officers selected, and a crew gathered. In the least possible time, with the scantiest aids, a peaceful steamer had to be re-created as a missile of ruin against the second commercial power of the world. Within "two long and tedious months" the conversion was accomplished, even to the mounting of the ordnance, which Semmes had to send a lieutenant in search of as the five pieces had been scattered along the railway lines, side-tracked for other freight. Porter,

on the other side, with a bewildering richness of advantages at command, could well pay generous tribute to Semmes' "patience and energy" in spite of his "trials and disappointments" in fitting out the *Sumter*.

Meanwhile the Navy Department was doing its share in forwarding this momentous work. Semmes' undaunted faith in his power, once on salt water, can be measured by his modest requisition for only ten thousand dollars in specie for use during his contemplated cruise. He desired only a sufficiency till he had "the opportunity of replenishing my military chest from the enemy." He "expected to make the *Sumter* pay her own expenses as soon as she should get to sea." The Secretary sent him sailing orders "to do the enemy's commerce the greatest injury in the shortest time." Mr. Mallory, in the next three years, must have often smiled with satisfaction at the thorough obedience to these instructions. The original despatch seems lost, and nothing of it remains except the above quotation that Semmes has in his book; at least in the Naval Records of the United States government, printed in Washington during the last twenty years, it is stated that the orders were not found. There was one other matter for Semmes him-



self to look after, to adopt some method of cipher communication so that his despatches if captured would be unintelligible to the enemy. He hunted through New Orleans till he obtained two copies of Reid's English Dictionary, one of which he forwarded to the Secretary, while he retained the other. Whatever word he wanted to use would be indicated by the number of the page, and a letter A or B for the column and another number for the position of the word from the top of the page. Thus "prisoner" would be "323, B, 15," meaning that it was on page 323, second column, fifteenth word from the top. The two had then a code without a key except what each possessed.

Semmes was internally raging to get at his prey. "We are losing a great deal of precious time," he confided in his diary. "The enemy's flag is being flaunted in our faces at all our ports by his ships of war, and his vessels of commerce are passing and re-passing on the ocean in defiance or in contempt of our power, and as yet we have not struck a blow." He formally commissioned the *Sumter* on June 3d, and then was delayed for "two long and tedious weeks," which he partly utilized in trying the speed of his boat. He was disappointed that he could get only nine knots out of her. He could

make space enough for only eight days' fuel, and though he had sails, these could be only partially utilized. Still he was undismayed. He was to take the sea "alone, against a vindictive and relentless enemy," swarming along the coasts, with inexhaustible means, but he recollected, sailor-like, that "luck is a lord," and he trusted in fortune.

So far there had been only material obstacles on his own side to circumvent, but treading his own deck, with a trained band under him, there was now danger to be faced in getting out of the Mississippi, past the fast and heavy steamships guarding the mouths of that river. Semmes dropped down to the head of the passes so as to be able to use any channel that might perchance be left unwatched. A month earlier he could have gone out without hazard. He had entered in his diary on May 24th: "The river is not yet blockaded, but expected to be to-morrow." He added, with a ring of defiance, "it must be a close blockade and by heavy vessels that will keep us in."<sup>1</sup>

Like a caged eagle beating his wings for an opening, Semmes lay in his position for nine days, now in sultry weather, now almost blistered by the glare of the sun reflected from the river's surface, and all

<sup>1</sup> "Naval War Records," Series I, Vol. I, p. 691.

the while so viciously assaulted by mosquitoes that the crew were ready to dare all perils to escape. He wondered why his adversaries did not come up the ten or twelve miles and capture his little *Sumter* or drive him farther up-stream, and anchor there where one ship would command all three principal outlets and block his escape. Nothing of the sort was attempted, though Semmes, anticipating a possible night attack, had mounted a special gun. The United States boats contented themselves with lying outside, keeping one or more near each bar to thwart Semmes' aims.

They did not realize how eternally wary the pent-up prisoner was. Semmes had all things ready so far as foresight could serve that end. Although it was near midnight when he came down to his post, he had "despatched a boat to the light-house for a pilot." The keeper "knew nothing of the pilots and was unwilling to come on board himself, though requested" to do so. The next day he sent to the pilots' station on the Southwest Pass and was abruptly told that "there are no pilots on duty now." Semmes was not to be baffled by either sullen or curt responses. He decided to test the loyalty of the pilots to the newly formed Confederacy. He ordered the captain of the association

and several members to come on board the *Sumter* and threatened with arrest any who disobeyed. They were in his cabin in a short time, with stammering excuses that Semmes cut off by requiring one of them to remain on board his ship constantly, to be relieved week by week until he no longer had need for the service.

Semmes did not relax his vigilance, although he felt "the anaconda drawing his folds around us," as he heard of new boats coming to the blockade. He kept well coaled, his eyes all the time open and his mind full of schemes. He had a deserted outlet sounded, but it was only ten and a half feet deep, while the *Sumter* drew twelve. Another time the pilot reported that the *Brooklyn* was nowhere to be seen. Immediately he was plowing his way downstream. After a spurt of four miles, there rode the *Brooklyn* at her usual berth. The *Sumter* had dragged her anchor during the night and thus brought a clump of trees between herself and her enemy. Chagrined, he returned to his place.

The next morning, Sunday, was bright, and bade fair to be idle also, when, during muster, a boat from the lighthouse tender reported the *Brooklyn* away on a chase. Instantly all was bustle, and the *Sumter*, as if fretting to cheat the marshes of the Mis-

issippi, "bounded away like a thing of life." All were exuberant except the pilot. He was pale, nervous, agitated, and when he saw that the gambler's chance was to be staked, he broke down and mumbled out: "I am a southwest bar pilot and know nothing of the other passes." Semmes flared out at him: "What! did you not know that I was lying at the head of the passes for the very purpose of taking any one of the outlets through which an opportunity of escape might present itself, and yet you dare tell me you knew but one of them, and have been deceiving me?" He listened to none of the man's whinings, but ordered up the signal for another pilot. He did not hope to get any, but would risk all on his own acquaintance of the channel gained as lighthouse inspector.

The *Brooklyn* was racing back to her station. Each had about the same distance to make, but Semmes was pushed along by a four knot current. He asked a lieutenant what was the prospect. "Prospect, sir! not the least in the world; there is no possible chance of our escaping that ship. Even if we get over the bar, she must overhaul us in a very short time. The *Brooklyn* is good for fourteen knots an hour, sir." Being told that that was her trial speed when all such matters are exaggerated,

he replied : " You'll see, sir, we made a passage in her only a few months ago from Tampico to Pensacola, and averaged about thirteen knots the whole distance."

Here a pilot boat was seen rapidly coming toward them, a very thrilling sight to Semmes. Still more moving, the pilot's beautiful young wife was " waving him on to his duty with her handkerchief." In a few moments " the gallant young fellow stood on the horse-block beside me," says Semmes, who also noticed " other petticoats fluttering in the breeze," as the little *Sumter* swept on past the lighthouse wharf. Half a mile further and there was the bar, with a Bremen steamer aground, and a warp, attached to a kedge, right across the passageway. The German crew considerably slackened it, and with another bound, the *Sumter* was over the barrier, and out on the " glad waters of the dark blue sea." She slowed down a little to drop the pilot who gave his farewell to Semmes : " Now, captain, you are all clear ; give her hell, and let her go."

The *Brooklyn* was only four miles away, almost within gun range, with steam up and thick volumes of smoke pouring from her chimneys. Semmes heaved his log, and was disappointed that he was

making only nine and a half knots. He could not understand this, for the current was still aiding him, but the engineer reported his boilers foaming. Knowing he could sail closer to the wind than his pursuer, he determined to do this though it brought him a little nearer to her for a time. A friendly squall now hid each from the other for half an hour, but it blew away, and there was the relentless hunter fearfully near. The money chest and papers were prepared to be tossed overboard, when the foaming ceased, the breeze freshened, and the *Sumter* began to "eat the wind" out of the *Brooklyn*. After half an hour more, Semmes saw one of his most beautiful pictures at sea, "when the *Brooklyn* let fly all her sheets and halliards at once, and clewed up and furled in man-of-war style all her sails from courses to royals."

She went sadly back to her lair, and the hounded *Sumter* was clear of the chase. The lookouts saw a couple of sail, but these specters soon faded. The prisoner had dared all. Now that they had gained an offing, they felt the "welcome heave of the sea," they breathed the pure air of the Gulf, untainted of malaria and untouched of mosquito's wing—irksome fetter and bond fell from them, they were free on the world's highway. The crew cheered

their flag, the officers had a libation of wine, Semmes breathed a prayer to his diary : " May the Almighty smile upon us and our cause, and may we show ourselves worthy servants of Him and it." His thoughts were with the things of the spirit. How peaceful all about him, the sleeping sea, " the screen of purple and gold " in the west, the myriad of stars, the blazing comet that " mirrored itself within a hundred feet of our little bark," but how hurried and confused the last few months. " A little while back and I had served under the very flag which I had that day defied." A discordant dream to him, painful, distressing !

As for the *Brooklyn*, her captain, outwitted, had sententiously ended his brief log entry : " Abandoned the chase and stood back for the pass." He had come within an ace of blotting out nearly the whole seagoing navy of the Confederacy, of saving millions of dollars of wealth from the flames, and of forestalling a serious international complication that almost brought to blows the two great English peoples facing each other across the Atlantic. He was unfairly censured by his own government.



## CHAPTER VII

### A DOZEN PRIZES

THROUGH his "bold and dashing adventure" the untamed deep was Semmes' to roam over as he listed. Knowing something of the speed of his ship and of the temper of his force, he was ready to front any fate. His crew, though gathered in a Southern port, were cosmopolite, "not half a dozen Southern-born men" being among them.

His officers he knew—all were from the South; all had been bred in the old navy, and consequently were trained for their work. His first lieutenant, the executive who was with him to the going down of the *Alabama*, was John McIntosh Kell, of Georgia. The two had first got acquainted when, as a passed midshipman, he had refused to obey an order to perform some menial work, and had been haled, along with several associates, before a court martial. Semmes appeared as counsel for them. Kell was nothing of the mutineer. He had a high sense of duty, and was a courteous gentleman

who, however, was a strict disciplinarian. Of the three other lieutenants, two were from South Carolina and one from Alabama. The surgeon from Virginia, the paymaster from South Carolina, with the chief engineer and the marine officer, completed the ward room, on which every captain has to rely for success in action. But although Semmes appointed his junior lieutenant navigating officer, and had every confidence in his ability, he always made observations himself, as he could sleep better amid dangers if he had himself calculated his position.

As the head of this band Semmes had to bear the responsibility of legal and international penalties and the heavy burden was on him at the start. President Lincoln, in April, had issued his blockade proclamation which closed with the solemn warning that all persons interfering with United States vessels "will be held amenable to the laws of the United States for the prevention and punishment of piracy." His Secretary of the Navy soon worked himself into a frenzy on the subject, and in his later reports had a large assortment of epithets to cast at Semmes and his vessels as "pirates," "piratical cruisers," "piratical privateers," "corsairs," "Algerine corsairs," "Mediterranean corsairs," "rovers," "lawless rovers," "rebel rovers,"

“unlicensed rovers,” “predatory rovers,” “robbers of the sea,” “lawless vessels,” “semi-piratical vessels.”<sup>1</sup>

The heat and passion of the hour bore many high officials far from their true moorings, but the din of the politician and the clamor of the newspaper were confusing on both sides. The sight even of the mighty mystic was at times blurred when he had to trust to blundering subordinates. Now, that all the hubbub has subsided, it is clear enough that there was no semblance of the pirate in either the *Sumter* or the *Alabama*.

On this point one of the most capable of authorities, J. R. Soley, a native of Massachusetts, graduate of Harvard, professor, and assistant Secretary of the Navy, says: “A great deal of uncalled-for abuse has been heaped upon the South for the work of the Confederate cruisers, and their mode of warfare has been repeatedly denounced as barbarous and piratical in official and unofficial publications. But neither the privateers, like the *Petrel* and *Savannah*, nor the commissioned cruisers, like the *Alabama* and the *Florida*, were guilty of any practices which, as against their enemies, were contrary to the laws of war. . . . The right to capture an

<sup>1</sup> Reports of Secretary of the Navy for 1861, 1862, 1863, 1864.

enemy's private property at sea is fully recognized by the law and practice of nations to-day. . . . Whether the prize is destroyed at sea or is brought into a prize court and condemned can make no possible difference to the owner, if the owner is clearly an enemy." Of course the captor would prefer to take his captive into port and reap some benefit from his risk and toil, but as foreign ports refused this privilege and all those at his home were blockaded, "nothing remained but to destroy the captured vessel at sea. To have done otherwise would have been to abandon the right of maritime capture."

In the War of 1812, the cruiser *Argus* had been a forerunner of the *Alabama* in a remarkable manner. The instructions issued then were the same in purport as Mallory's to Semmes, namely, "destroy all you capture unless in some extraordinary cases that clearly warrant an exception." In the Crimean War an English authority had said it was entirely "justifiable, even praiseworthy, in the captors to destroy an enemy's vessel." Subsequent to the Civil War, in the struggle between France and Germany, the French had followed the same road, and had burnt at least two captured vessels. In fact, thinks Soley, "other governments in case of

war with a commercial power will deem themselves fortunate if they can rival the achievements of the Confederate commerce destroyers.”<sup>1</sup>

Semmes himself refuted the charges of piracy in a letter in the *London Times* in January, 1862. He referred to the vessels commissioned by the Americans in the revolutionary uprising against England. He retaliated by pointing out that prizes had been made by the United States blockading squadrons, some of which were also burnt.

Without a doubt as to the justice of his cause, and feeling just as sure of his legal and international position—since substantiated also by the best students of the question—Semmes, after eluding the net stretched for him, was well prepared for his career of destruction wherever he could find his prey. Porter thought that the Spanish main would be Semmes' objective because he had cruised all over that region, through the tortuous channels among its wilderness of isles. Around Occoa Bay, the Isle of Pines, and other spots that Semmes had visited, were “hiding holes” enough to conceal a thousand boats, so that the “devil himself could not find the vessels unless he knew the locality” as well as Semmes.

<sup>1</sup> Soley's “Blockade and Cruisers,” pp. 229-230.

His intention was "to make a dash of a few days at the enemy's ships on the south side of Cuba, coal at some convenient point, stretch over to Barbadoes, coal again, and then strike for the Brazilian coast." On the third day after winning his freedom, while running along the Cuban coast and the Isle of Pines, he heard the welcome sound of "Sail ho!" from the masthead. Two boats were in sight. One was Spanish and was at once released.

The other was to be Semmes' first prize, the *Golden Rocket*, of seven hundred tons, bound to a Cuban port for a cargo of sugar. Semmes had no difficulty in determining the nationality of the craft. "There were the American register and clearance and the American character impressed upon every plank and spar of the ship." The master was almost too astonished to make any complaint as he never dreamed of seeing a Confederate flag on the high seas. Semmes here began his custom, invariably followed afterward, of seizing the chronometers and flags. He took besides some provisions and sails. Perhaps because he did not want to spare hands for a prize crew, he concluded to burn his capture. Mournful associations came to his memory, sad reflections ruled his thoughts: the flag he had heretofore cherished had just waved over that vessel;

it was pitiful that evil passions had set brothers at war with each other even far out on the rolling waves.

It was the first physical blow he had struck against the foe, and he has left us a graphic description of the work of the torch. The ship was built of Maine pine "calked with old-fashioned oakum and paid with pitch : the woodwork of the cabin was like so much tinder, having been seasoned by many voyages to the tropics, and the fore-castle was stored with paints and oils." The torch was applied at once in three places, cabin, main-hold and fore-castle, and the flames burst from all three. "The burning ship, with the *Sumter's* boat in the act of shoving off from her side ; the *Sumter* herself, with her grim, black sides, lying in repose like some great sea-monster, gloating upon the spectacle, and the sleeping sea, for there was scarce a ripple upon the water, were all brilliantly lighted. The in-draught into the burning ship's holds and cabins added every moment new fuel to the flames, and now they could be heard like the fires of a hundred furnaces in full blast. The prize ship had been laid to, with her main topsail to the mast, and all her light sails, though clewed up, were flying loose about the yards. The forked tongue of the devour-

ing element, leaping into the rigging, newly tarred, ran rapidly up the shrouds, first into the tops, then to the topmast heads, thence to the topgallant, and royal mastheads, and in a moment more to the trucks; and while this rapid ascent of the main current of fire was going on, other currents had run out upon the yards, and ignited all the sails. A topgallantsail, all on fire, would now fly off from the yard, and sailing leisurely in the direction of the light breeze that was fanning, rather than blowing, break into bright and silent patches of flame, and settle, or rather silt, into the sea. The yard would then follow, and not being wholly submerged by its descent into the sea, would retain a portion of its flame, and continue to burn, as a floating brand, for some minutes. At one time the intricate network of the cordage of the burning ship was traced, as with a pencil of fire, upon the black sky beyond, the many threads of flame twisting and writhing, like so many serpents that had received their death wounds. The mizzenmast now went by the board, then the foremast, and in a few minutes afterward the great mainmast tottered, reeled, and fell over the ship's side into the sea, making a noise like that of the sturdy oak of the forests when it falls by the stroke of the axeman."



As for the crew, it was a matter of pride with Semmes to treat "prisoners of war according to the laws of war." "The captain was invited to mess in the ward room, and when he was afterward landed, the officers generously made him up a purse to supply his immediate necessities. The crew was put into a mess by themselves, with their own cook, and was put on a footing with regard to rations with the *Sumter's* own men. We were making war upon the enemy's commerce but not upon his unarmed seamen."

Semmes wasted no time, but the next day overhauled two more vessels, the *Cuba* and the *Machias*, both loaded with sugar and molasses, and both from a Cuban port bound for England. He could not burn these as they had neutral property aboard, but putting prize crews on them he made for Cienfuegos, with both in tow, with the hope that Spain would allow both belligerents to bring in prizes for adjudication. As he was too much impeded by the two boats, he cast off the *Cuba*, ordering the prize crew of one midshipman and four seamen to follow him in. They never did so, as some were treacherous and deserted to the original master and crew, who secured some of the firearms, wounded the midshipman, recaptured the craft and escaped.

On her way to the harbor, the *Sumter*, on July 5th, made two more captures, the *Ben Dunning* and the *Albert Adams*, both also bearing neutral goods as freight. As it was too late to get in to anchor that night, Semmes lay off until daylight. The next morning dawned bright and clear, and as he was preparing to move in, he saw smoke coming down the river. It was a steamer towing two American barks and one brig. Semmes craftily showed Spanish colors, and patiently waited till all three, having been cast off from the towing steamer, were beyond the marine league from land. Then the *Sumter* set off in pursuit. She soon captured them ; the *West Wind*, the *Louisa Kilham*, and the *Naiad*.

Semmes proudly stood in with his six catches, but he was warned by musket-balls from the fort to proceed no further, as his pennant was so strange a device that he was suspected of being a buccaneer. The others with the United States flag flying were permitted to pass. Explanations were simple with the aid of wine, and Semmes was soon in the haven, confronted with the serious problem of inducing the authorities to grant the South entrance into Spanish ports with prizes. To bend the laws of nations to his purpose was a greater feat than evading the

squadron at the mouth of the Mississippi. He made just as bold and as gallant an effort, and his skill, if possible, was even more admirable.

He sent a strong despatch to the government arguing for the right. He urged that the South was assailed in "an aggressive and unjust war," in which the manufacturing and commercial North have "dishonestly seized and turned against the Confederate states" all the naval force that had been created by both sections, and in consequence the United States "are enabled in the first months of the war to blockade all the ports" of the South, which nevertheless is "maintaining a government *de facto* and not only holding the enemy in check but gaining advantages over him." At this juncture of affairs, belligerent rights are granted both sides by the leading nations, excluding the prizes of each from their ports. While such restriction, imposed impartially on the two contending foes, seems perfectly fair, yet the rule "cannot be applied in the present war without operating with great injustice to the Confederate states," since they will be shut out of all ports, their own being "hermetically sealed" by the blockade, and all others being closed by this policy of the powers. This will not be equal justice to both parties because the

United States can take their prizes home, while the Confederacy can only destroy theirs. Besides as to the six vessels just brought in, the special question arises as to neutral property, some being certificated as of Spanish ownership. A judicial inquiry is necessary to determine the matter.

It was a bold venture on the part of Semmes, and he made the strongest sort of plea for a weak cause. He could only lose, but he never expected to lose his six prizes also. The Spanish authorities turned them all back to their owners instead of notifying Semmes to take them away. Of course there had to be some shadow of justification for such an extraordinary proceeding, and hence it was charged that he had violated Spanish neutrality in making three of the captures within the marine league, the evidence being the testimony of an English sailor on the tug, and of Semmes' Spanish pilot who had estimated for Semmes that it was five miles from shore, and then afterward reduced it to less than three. Semmes attributed this change in figures to the magic of gold skilfully handled by the United States consul, but he consoled himself with a dream of how Spain could be made to pay for all her shameless conduct after the Confederacy was fully established. He had done his best to avoid de-

struction in capture, but the usage of the nations was against him, and he could only apply the torch from now on.

Having taken on a good supply of coal, he set out, as he had aimed, to make the Barbadoes, there recoal and go thence to Cape St. Roque, Brazil, and "reap a rich harvest from the enemy's commerce." But the trade winds beat on him so heavily that he was forced to consume the most of his fuel; hence he altered his course and went to the Dutch island of Curaçoa. Here he was to meet again the watchful and pertinacious American consul, who claimed that the *Sumter* was a pirate and should not be allowed to enter the harbor. When Semmes heard this he despatched a firm protest against such treatment. He declared that the *Sumter* was a "ship of war duly commissioned by the government of the Confederate states, which states have been recognized as belligerents in the present war by all the leading powers of Europe," and as such she had as much right as any ship of the United States. These other powers had drawn no distinction between the belligerents. Holland admitted the cruisers of the United States, then why should she exclude those of the Confederacy? If she thus intended to aid one of the belligerents and not the other, he would like

a frank statement from the government to that effect.

All the dignitaries of the island gathered, smoked, and pondered, while Semmes' officer sat in an outer room, mixing and drinking juleps. But Semmes could not endure such delay when he could be of assistance in reaching a decision. He had his drums beat to quarters and his guns cast loose to try out his crew at a little practice. "Whiz! went a shell across the windows of the council chamber which overlooked the sea; the shell bursting like a clap of rather sharp, ragged thunder, a little beyond in close proximity to the target. Sundry heads were seen immediately to pop out of the windows of the chamber, and then to be withdrawn very suddenly. . . . By the time we had fired three or four shells Chapman's boat was seen returning. . . . My lieutenant came on board smiling . . . and said the governor had given us permission to enter."

Here Semmes stayed a week, repairing and coaling, visiting ashore and giving fine, vivid pen pictures of the scenery and the people. If he had been a corsair at heart, an adventurer, as he was so often charged with being by irresponsible journalists, a fine chance was presented to him one day when an

emissary from the deposed president of Venezuela suggested that he reinstate that official in his post. Semmes heard him courteously but firmly declined, though he humorously dallied with the scheme in his imagination as an opportunity for an unscrupulous ambitious man to gather up all the piraguas and canoes of the Venezuelan navy. He might then put to flight all opposition and declare himself head of the government, eventually, perhaps having himself crowned king.

A few days later he probably smiled at this roseate dream when the conditions were reversed, and he was a suppliant at a port of Venezuela for an international favor. The day after leaving Curaçoa he captured the *Abby Bradford*, bound for Puerto Cabello. Being near that port he resolved to try his hand with the *de facto* president of Venezuela on the question of admitting his prizes. He saw no reason why "some of these beggarly South American republics" should be "putting on the airs of nations, and talking about acknowledging other people when they had lived a whole generation themselves without the acknowledgment of Spain." But again he found the ever vigilant and ubiquitous "Yankee consul" ready to frustrate his designs.

In spite of heavy odds he valiantly made the

effort. No sooner was he anchored than he despatched a strong, dignified statement to the governor urging that the Venezuelan government "admit both belligerents to bring their prizes into her waters." But if she shall adopt the principle of exclusion, she will be favoring the United States as they can take their captures to their own ports, while nothing will be left for the Confederates except to destroy theirs at sea. "A rule which would produce such unequal results as this is not a just rule, . . . and as equality and justice are of the essence of neutrality, I take it for granted that Venezuela will not adopt it."

When his missive "was handed to the governor, there was a racing and chasing of barefooted orderlies. . . . A grand council was held at which the Confederate states had not the honor to be represented," but the American consul was there, and he was the symbol of profitable trade between the two lands. His influence dominated the deliberations. Semmes was very quickly notified by the governor to take his prize out of the harbor. It was a polite document but a strongly worded one. Semmes finished getting provisions aboard, and departed leisurely, having put a prize crew aboard the *Bradford* with orders to run into New Orleans. They



tried but were recaptured. Semmes forwarded on her a letter to Secretary Mallory, briefly recounting his exploits to date, and modestly remarking: "We are all well and doing a pretty fair business in mercantile parlance, having made nine captures in twenty-six days."

He was scarcely out on the high seas again before he took the *Joseph Maxwell*, with half her cargo neutral. Semmes made another effort to get belligerent rights for prizes from Venezuela. As the property was consigned to a merchant in Puerto Cabello, he put back there, being careful to leave his capture over a marine league from shore. He sent in his paymaster to see whether "this prize in which a Venezuelan citizen was interested would not be permitted to enter and remain until she could be adjudicated." The messenger soon returned and "handed me a written command from the governor to bring the *Maxwell* in and deliver her to him until the Venezuelan courts could determine whether she had been captured within the marine league or not." Semmes was amused by such insolence, but he saw some half-naked soldiers around the guns of the fort, whereupon he got his own ready, and sailed out. He would have burned the *Maxwell* but for the neutral freight aboard. In-

stead he sent her to Cienfuegos to be adjudicated by a prize court of the Confederate states. He did not yet know that Spain had issued a neutrality proclamation like those of Great Britain and France. His prize, the *Maxwell*, was received by the Cuban authorities and handed back to the owners.

From this point Semmes sailed to the island of Trinidad where he had another contest over international law points on the question of whether coal was contraband of war, but the law officers of the English crown decided that it was not. There was delay in making up their minds, but Semmes had "too much respect for the calibre of certain guns on shore to throw any shells across the windows of the council chamber," remembering that this was an English and not a Dutch possession.

Having put his fuel aboard, he went on southward, touching at the Guianas on the way, to Maranham, Brazil, about two and a half degrees south latitude, on September 6th. Here he remained until September 15th, repairing his ship and taking on supplies. He had aimed, as at the start, to make Cape St. Roque, at the northeast angle of Brazil, so as to fall upon the traders as they rounded that point on their course from the South Atlantic to New York, but he had lost so much time that it

seemed unwise to continue to that place. At that season the trade winds were blowing such a gale off the Cape that any boat could escape the *Sumter* if she used sail only. Coal was too costly, as Semmes had paid \$17.50 per ton at Maranham. But from December to March the winds would be only moderate and that was the time for the *Sumter* to operate there. He decided then to watch the crossing path of the calm belt taken by sailing vessels bound for New York and other northerly ports after rounding Cape St. Roque. He made northward and lay in wait along the diagonal from the southeast to the northwest angles of a quadrilateral covering seven degrees of latitude and six degrees of longitude, formed by the parallels of  $2\frac{1}{2}^{\circ}$  and  $9\frac{1}{2}^{\circ}$  north, and the meridians of  $41\frac{1}{2}^{\circ}$  and  $47\frac{1}{2}^{\circ}$  west. But it was useless as the "wary sea birds had evidently all taken the alarm and winged their way home by other routes."

He then set out for the West Indies to hunt there for a while and then go to Martinique for coal. On the path, in the last days of October, he caught the *Daniel Trowbridge*, a lucky warehouse for him, as he transferred enough food from her to serve for the next five months—"beef, pork, canvased hams, ship bread, fancy crackers, cheese, flour, everything

being of the very best quality." Then he gave her to the flames, and went on with the chase, gradually wearing toward the island of Martinique. On the 9th of November he "ran along down it, near enough to enjoy its beautiful scenery, with its waving palms, fields of sugar cane, and picturesque country houses, until we reached the quiet little town of Fort de France," the capital, and there he anchored.

Semmes had been afloat on the waters of the world, moving as he willed, had made twelve captures, and had come in contact with no armed foe. This had not been due to simple good luck on his part or to remissness on the side of the United States. It had been eternal vigilance with him and unwearied pursuit with them. The wildest rumors filled the air that the *Sumter* was here, was there, was even in the English channel. To the interested and thinking ones her course baffled all conjecture, and in their perplexity they naturally turned to government authorities. Especially the merchants trading southward were anxious and alarmed, and immediately began to ask for protection. Within a fortnight after Semmes had eluded the *Brooklyn* at the mouth of the Mississippi, a senator requested a convoy for a boat carrying over

two million dollars in gold on its passage to New York. Other appeals came in for the care of the trade with Central and South American ports.

Secretary Welles, Lincoln's Secretary of the Navy, received many suggestions and much advice. In one instance, a scheme was proposed by Alfred T. Mahan, then a midshipman. After apologizing for "youthful presumption," he recommended to the Secretary that a decoy ship be prepared out of some of the "confiscated rebel vessels," with a heavy pivot gun in hiding so that Semmes would think her a merchant boat. Then when she approached confidently near enough, the *Sumter* could either be sunk with one discharge, or boarded and overcome. Mahan confessed that his scheme might appear "hare-brained," but even if it failed, it was only the loss of "a useless ship, a midshipman, and a hundred men."

By the middle of August, one of the captains urged that "a smart steamer like the *Iroquois*, with a smart captain, . . . would stand a good chance for catching the *Sumter* or for badgering her into port in a very short time," if he made a circuit of about five hundred miles around Cuba.<sup>1</sup> Palmer, of the *Iroquois*, got this assignment and we shall

<sup>1</sup> "Naval War Records," Series I, Vol. I, p. 62.

see later that at St. Pierre he caught the *Sumter* in port, but with no profit, since he suffered when she slipped away from him one night.

Welles was neither idle nor vague, and still less was he distracted from the tasks of his office by the cries from the counting-house. He knew that a rigid blockade of the Southern coast was far more deadly to the South than the capture of this one rover. But he detached as many boats for the chase as he could, and he was peremptory in his orders that the hunt should go on relentlessly until the "pirate *Sumter*" was checked in her career, or some definite news was obtained of her end.

He was heartily seconded by the few naval officers who could be spared from the home service. One of them, Captain Eytinge, of the *Shepherd Knapp*, "made the entire circuit of the West India Islands three several times, going as far to eastward as the Leeward Islands, as far to westward as Abaco, and nearly as far north as the Bermudas." He hailed every boat of every nationality he met. He was aflame to "pursue the traitor," even into the Mediterranean Sea, with which he said that he was thoroughly acquainted. He begged for this privilege. "I am ready," he declared, "to sacrifice my life to sustain my country's honor."

But the keenest pursuer of Semmes was Porter, afterward the great admiral. He recaptured Semmes' ninth prize, the *Abby Bradford*, on August 13, 1861, as she was trying to steal into New Orleans. From information he received, he was very confident that Semmes "is in a position now where he can't escape if properly looked after. He is out of coal and out of credit." Porter left for Pensacola at once to carry in his news and to ask the privilege of going after the *Sumter*. This was granted him and he instantly made for the Caribbean Sea, through which he cruised, touching at Cienfuegos, at Puerto Cabello, at Barbadoes, at Trinidad, at Cayenne, at Curaçoa, and at Surinam, all places where Semmes had called.

Neither trick nor subterfuge could throw him off the scent. At Surinam he was assured that the *Sumter* had gone to Jamaica to return after three weeks, but he shrewdly divined that Semmes was feeling his way down to Cape St. Roque, as he was, and Porter set off thither himself. He was hopeful, as he could go fifty miles a day further than Semmes. He traced the *Sumter* into Maranham, missing her off that port by only three days, and getting into the harbor of San Luiz only five days after she had departed. He raked Maranham for every scrap of

information and again guessed Semmes' movements correctly. He learned that the *Sumter* had knocked off her false keel, coming up the inlet, and inferred therefore that she could not make St. Roque, but had gone north of the equator. He steered for the track of northward bound vessels on their passage to New York, about  $44^{\circ}$  west longitude, in the heart of the quadrilateral that Semmes had marked out for himself to cruise over for those very boats that Porter had in mind. So clear was Porter in his reasoning, and so energetic in his movements, that he calculated that at one time he was within seventy-five miles of the *Sumter*, while Semmes estimated that they were only fifty miles apart.

Porter had not only exerted himself to the utmost, but he had also advocated that others be put at the work. He indicated routes around the islands of the Spanish main for the constant policing of eight ships. Later, when he learned of Semmes' intention to burn all captures, he warmly advised that one hundred boats be sent out to thwart such a destructive aim.

Like his wily adversary, he was embarrassed by the aloofness of the neutral powers, and thought them, especially France and England, very solicitous for the welfare of the *Sumter* and her cause.



Again like Semmes, he valiantly carried on verbal duels over points of international law, though perhaps not with the skill and incisiveness of Semmes, as he had not made such a study of the law and of public relations.

But in spite of the comprehensiveness of his plans, in spite of his unerring instinct on the trail, Porter finally had only regrets to offer his superiors for the futility of his chase.

## CHAPTER VIII

### SECOND ESCAPE AND END OF THE "SUMTER"

IF Semmes had known of all these schemes and manœuvres he might not have rested so comfortably in the French port of Fort de France. He and his officers were treated with all consideration and special entertainments were prepared for them. They walked, they rode, they feasted, and they danced. The crew also went on land, and each spent his sovereign for grog.

But Semmes' pen had its usual international task to perform. He had to buy coal. His paymaster found it in the near-by town of St. Pierre, but the customs official refused him the privilege of purchasing it. Semmes sent a polite note to the governor, and at once got an order overruling the zealous but ignorant collector there. As soon as he had watered his ship from the public reservoir, he got up steam and was very quickly in the harbor of the chief city of the Island of Martinique, St. Pierre, whose total destruction with her population

of forty thousand some two score of years later startled all humanity.

He instantly began to take on fuel ; but, swift as he was, in less than two days an energetic enemy, the United States war vessel, *Iroquois*, glided into the same haven. She was twice as large as the *Sumter* and much swifter, and her captain, James S. Palmer, was active and determined. He was under special orders to catch the *Sumter* and had been anxiously cruising from point to point in those waters for weeks. Actuated by duty and spurred by ambition he was prepared to violate international law, and offend a friendly nation in order to crush this "pest of commerce." He lectured the French governor on his obligations, and was rebuked by a diplomatic answer in which the governor said that he knew what he was about. Palmer confessed to his superior officer that he had transgressed some of the rules of war himself, but said that the French would have to "pocket this." He was bold and resourceful, but he was pitted against a skilled antagonist. Palmer came in and all night "cruised around the harbor within half a gunshot of" the *Sumter*, so close at times in fact that Semmes had his force under arms to repel attack. Later he actually anchored, but immedi-

ately pulled up on learning officially from a French naval officer who had come on board that "one belligerent could not depart till twenty-four hours after the other." Palmer, fearing the *Sumter* might leave before he did, hastened away so quickly that he bore his guest out to sea with him before he could take boat to leave. Here he kept guard some seven or eight miles out by day, and less than three by night, or so it seemed to Semmes. During the while he communicated with sympathetic aids on shore by boat or sign. He also arranged with a Maine schooner to signal him the course of the *Sumter* when she should start away.

In the meanwhile Semmes was, if possible, more alert. Both made representations to the French governor. Each believed that he favored the other, while the islanders broke into two parties in their sympathies. Semmes' steady fusillade of notes and protests did not interfere with his material operations. He heeled his ship and scraped her. He had his machinery overhauled, his pumps repaired, his batteries drawn and reloaded, his small arms cleaned, his barrels filled with fresh water, some heavy wet provisions shifted so as to make better sailing. He keenly scanned the skies for a cloudy night, constantly apprehending that a second vessel

would come to the assistance of the *Iroquois*, thus bottling him up effectually. On the ninth day after his entrance, it began about noon to rain and he counted on an overcast sky for that evening, but the sun set fair. He could delay no longer. Like his prototype on land, Stonewall Jackson, he kept his plans in his own bosom, divulging no more of them than necessary. He had ordered every man to be on board by sunset. At the sound of the eight o'clock gun on shore, following previous orders, the chain was slipped, the rope cut and the engines started, and the *Sumter* began her second race for liberty.

Semmes penned in his diary this lively account of how he eluded the *Iroquois* :

“The enemy being on the starboard bow, and apparently standing toward the north point of the roadstead, I headed her for the south point, giving her full steam. So much on the *qui vive* were the townspeople that we had scarcely moved twenty yards when a shout rent the air and there was a confused murmur of voices as if Babel had been let loose. As we neared the French steamer of war, *Acheron*, signals were made to the enemy by means of blue lights from one of the Yankee schooners in port, perceiving which and knowing that the signals were so arranged as to designate our direction, after running a few hundred yards further, I doubled and came back, under cover of

the land, where I stopped once or twice to assure myself that the enemy was continuing his course in the opposite direction in obedience to his signals, when, as soon as the engineer could do so (for he had to cool his bearings, and this was an anxious moment for me), I gave her all steam and stood for the north end of the island. As we approached it the fates, which before had seemed unpropitious for us, began to smile, and a rain squall which had come up quite unexpectedly began to envelop us in its friendly fold, shutting in our dense clouds of black smoke, which were really the worst telltales we had to dread. The first half hour's run was a very anxious one for us; but as we began to lose sight of the lights of the town, and to draw away from the land, we knew that the enemy had been caught in his own trap, and that we had successfully eluded him. . . . Our ship made good speed, though she was very deep, and by 11:30 we were up with the south end of Dominica. Here the wind fell and we ran along the coast of the island in a smooth sea, not more than four or five miles from the land. The moon by this time being up, the bold and picturesque outlines of this island, softened by her rays and wreathed in fleecy clouds, presented a beautiful night scene. . . . Our run took every one by surprise; several of the officers had breakfast and riding appointments for several days ahead."

By the next morning, Sunday, Semmes thought he was at least one hundred and fifty miles from the *Iroquois*, and so relieved was his soul that he relaxed discipline, omitted the muster and allowed a day of rest. By evening he was far out on the

rolling waves, free as the winds, troubled no longer with points of law, peacefully smoking his cigar among his officers, and recalling a couplet :

“ Far as the breeze can bear, the billow foam,  
Survey our empire, and behold our home.”

Serene and poetic, Semmes could afford to render highest tribute to “the vigilance and skill” of his gallant opponent, who suffered “great dejection” at his failure. Newspaper clamor, however, was not satisfied till Palmer was relieved from command, but on investigation he was exonerated, restored to his post, and two years after the close of the conflict died a rear-admiral in the United States naval service.

Semmes had pretty well scattered the game in this field, so he had to widen his range and cross the Atlantic to see what he could find in European regions. On the way he captured and bonded the *Montmorenci*. Shortly afterward he caught the *Arcade*, from Maine bound for Guadeloupe, and she and her cargo of staves were soon afire and lighting the *Sumter* on her way.

Early in December, the *Vigilant*, also from Maine, loaded with “mineral guano,” met the same fate. The anniversary of Semmes’ escape from the *Somers*

in the Mexican War, off Vera Cruz, was signalized by the capture and firing of the *Eben Dodge*, from Massachusetts.

The easterly winds beat in his face, a raging storm almost sank him, but he held steadily on until early in January, 1862, he dropped anchor in the harbor of Cadiz, and instantly began his battles with the pen. He courteously notified the consul of the United States that he had forty-three prisoners, fellow-citizens of the consul, whom he wished to deliver to him, but getting a reply without the official title Semmes broke off communication. He was forced to take up the issue of belligerent rights with the Spanish authorities, as he was peremptorily ordered to depart within twenty-four hours. He formally protested and asked for the opportunity to make all repairs that were necessary to enable him to take to the high seas again. He won his case, as, under the circumstances, his position was impregnable, but not till much red tape had been unwound by the "circumlocution office."

The *Sumter* was put in one of the best of docks. She was found to be sound as to hull, the accident at Maranham having rubbed off only a small part of her copper, and having indented, not broken, one of her planks. The leak that had been trouble-



some was located in the propeller sleeve. Nothing was done to the boilers, as the inspectors decided they could be used for an ocean trip.

Several of his crew deserted and Semmes, being informed that they were being lodged at the United States consulate, again opened up argument as to the legality of such a refuge. He firmly grounded his plea on the custom of all nations to arrest and return deserters from ships of war without making any inquiry into the nationality of the runaways, and as Spain had granted the Confederate states belligerent footing, it was plainly the duty of the authorities to aid him in recapturing his runaway sailors. To permit them to remain under the protection of the consul of the United States "would in effect convert the consulate into a camp, and enable the consul to exercise the rights of a belligerent in neutral territory. He might cripple me as effectually by this indirect means as if he were to assault me by means of an armed expedition." Perhaps Semmes himself hardly expected anything to come from this remonstrance; at any rate he got nothing. Under the teachings of international law, the consulate was United States territory and Spain could not afford to violate one of the widely accepted principles of the relations of nations.

Spain seemed almost hysterical over the presence of the *Sumter*, and as she came to anchor, began urging Semmes to depart. The repairs had been made very grudgingly, and shortly afterward he was ordered to sail away. He needed coal and his funds were exhausted. He despatched word to the Confederate agent, but received no answer. Finally one morning, before Semmes had got out of bed, a peremptory order came from the governor "to depart within six hours." Semmes says: "I went on shore, for the first time, to have an official interview with the blockhead. I found him . . . a large, thick-set, bull-necked fellow with whom . . . it would be of but little use to reason." The most he would yield was to ask from the authorities in Madrid that Semmes should be granted the privilege of remaining in Cadiz until a remittance could come, but he declared if no reply came within six hours, the *Sumter* must get under way.

Semmes was highly indignant and resolved to go with the small amount of coal on hand and put into Gibraltar. As he was getting ready an official came aboard to report that the Queen had ordered that the time limit be put at twenty-four hours instead of six and that the governor was drawing up a formal paper to send on board. Semmes treated

the concession very carelessly, and set off, but as he was passing the government house a boat came rapidly toward him "with a man standing up in the bow shaking a letter at us with great vehemence." Receiving no attention the boat turned about, and Semmes left the Spanish dominions for the second and last time. He had suffered exasperating delays and contemptuous rebuffs.

At dawn the next day, while moving up the Strait, he overhauled two sail, the *Neapolitan* and the *Investigator*. The latter having neutral cargo aboard was bonded ; the former having fifty tons of sulphur, consigned to Boston, was given to the torch. Here within one of the most historical gateways of the earth, viewed by the Moor and the Spaniard, was an exhibition that called forth sketch book and pencil, and the artists were busy delineating one of the most remarkable spectacles of the ages. Some time after dark, the *Sumter* brought to under the shadow of the renowned Rock of Gibraltar, but no man knew that she had made her last voyage under the Confederate flag.

Here she and her master and crew were at rest for nearly three months, in much more congenial company than at Cadiz ; for, instead of the forbidding countenance of the Spaniard, the English turned to

the visitors a face as friendly as the official formalities would permit to a mere belligerent. Semmes and his ward-room received all the social courtesies possible. They visited and were visited, clubs and reading-rooms were thrown open to them, military and citizenry invited them to all festivities. Semmes was shown over the fortifications as far as any outsider was privileged to go, and he noted that whenever he appeared in his uniform he was always saluted by the guards. In fact no distinction was drawn between the Confederates and Federals except that the flag of the former was not saluted, being recognized only for warlike purposes.

As far as the usage of nations would at all permit it, the English aided him. Within twenty-four hours after his official landing he got an anchor from the naval officer. Even this delay was not a personal choice, but to give time for the law officers to pass upon the request. No doubt the same generosity would have been extended in arresting his deserters, but in the absence of any treaty between England and the Southern states, the authorities could not see their way clear to do anything.

Doubtless there was the same private inclination toward him on the question of supplying him with

coal from the government stores, but again the legal branch, this time at headquarters in London, decided adversely. Immediately after securing funds, the first week in February, Semmes wanted to restock the *Sumter*, but was baffled at every turn by the combination among the dealers not to sell to him at all or only at prohibitive prices. The alert and resourceful consul of the United States, with his prestige and his commercial influence, knew how completely the *Sumter's* wings would be clipped if she remained without fuel. Semmes, in his wrath, believed that the consul stopped at neither flattery nor cajolery, at neither bribery nor corruption; but even if he did, he had the sanction of the ages past and the endorsement of untold precedents, all summed up in the terse maxim that "all is fair in love and war."

Semmes, however, was as fertile in expedients, and as undaunted before difficulties as any man. He drew on his reservoir of legal knowledge and sent a despatch to the English officials stating his dilemma and desiring the right of purchase from the government stores, advancing the very shrewd analogy of a ship coming into port without provisions, and being unable to buy from private firms. Certainly in such case the public authorities would

aid her from the public stock. Coal had been declared "innocuous" by the Foreign Secretary in London, and hence the Gibraltar officials would have just as much excuse to supply him with a hundred tons or so as to help a starving ship with provisions, or a disabled one with a mast. At Cadiz the *Sumter* had been repaired in a government dock because there was no private one there; why could not she be loaded with public coal in Gibraltar when none was to be had from private hands? It was a strong argument, skilfully put, but all to no purpose.

Hearing that there was a chance at Cadiz, he ordered his paymaster to go there, in the company of a Southerner who had served as United States consul at that place, on board a French vessel. While stopping at Tangier, on the Moorish coast, these two gentlemen walked into the town, and were arrested by the local police at the instance of the United States consul who claimed them for "the crime of treason or for robbery on the high seas." They were put in irons, but the paymaster, Myers, "got the irons off and jumped out of the second story of the consulate, . . . got over the wall into the house of a Moor, and was again arrested." The natives arranged a demonstration in their favor, but they were soon transferred to a naval vessel,

and carried to Cadiz and thence forwarded on a merchantman to the United States.

In the meantime, Semmes had acted with all his native energy and well-known eloquence. He demanded of the Tangier governor the release of the men, and tried to get the *Sumter* ready for serious action, but found that her boilers would not bear a greater pressure than twelve pounds. He then sought to enlist the aid of the English representative in Gibraltar, and urged him to ask the English diplomatic agent in Tangier to use his influence with the semi-civilized Moors to set the victims free. Semmes contended that as both countries were recognized as belligerents, it was unfair for the Moors to aid one side. Though there was a treaty with the United States, it did not cover political offenses. But the British consul and the representatives of all the civilized lands there deemed it best to keep hands off, and refrained from offering any advice. Semmes wrote to the British consul, and very lucidly stated the case. "If Morocco adopts the status given to the Confederate states by Europe, she must remain neutral between the two belligerents, not undertaking to judge of the nationality of the citizens of either of them, or to decide any other question growing out of the

war which does not concern her own interests. She has no right therefore to adjudge a citizen of the Confederate states to be a citizen of the United States ; and not having this right herself she cannot convey it by treaty to the United States to be exercised by their consul in Tangier.”

All of this clear logic did not move the recipient to do more than tell the Moors that he had no suggestion to advance to them. But Semmes had one more scheme. He tried to get some action by the French government, and sent a strong argument to Slidell, the Confederate agent in Paris, urging that the honor of the French flag was involved, inasmuch as both of the men had been passengers on a French boat and had merely touched on land. If Morocco had been among the family of European nations, of course the two travelers would have come under the land jurisdiction immediately, but as it was, the French consul had authority of trial of all offenses in which Frenchmen were involved. If they had been Frenchmen, their case would have been taken before the consul as judge. If the flag would have protected Frenchmen on that vessel, why should it not also throw its folds around these two passengers who had embarked on it in good faith that they would be guaranteed against unjust molestation.



All Semmes' legal shrewdness and training came to naught, as neither the French nor the English would stir in the matter. But the strength of his position was virtually admitted by the United States, as both men were set free in a few months after their arrival in Boston, where they were treated as prisoners of war.

In the meanwhile, amid all this verbal battling on international law points, Semmes' attention was seriously drawn to the condition of the *Sumter*. He had been unable to use force against the Moors because of the weakness of her boilers. He had hoped, when he came into a port of so much traffic as Gibraltar, that he could replace them with a new set, but none were available for him. He had been tied up there by lack of funds, but when some sixteen thousand dollars were remitted to him he was still unable to take the aggressive, not only because of the defect in his machinery, but because she was blockaded for the third and last time. He could see only inaction for several months at least, and that was galling to his nature. There remained only abandonment of the *Sumter*, and subsequent service elsewhere. She had gallantly done her part. She had taken eighteen ships, and though Semmes, contrary to his expectations, had captured very

little money, about a thousand dollars only, her expense to the government had been slight, only about \$28,000. Only seven of the prizes were burned, but the damage to commerce was incalculable, as the alarm spread out of all proportion to the destruction, and the carrying trade was already beginning to be seriously crippled. Besides she drew off some half a dozen cruisers from the blockading line along the Southern coast. But, useful as she had been, her career was over, and the routine process of ending her course was rapidly followed. A board of survey pronounced her unseaworthy in her boilers, and the officers voted unanimously in favor of laying her up.

It was a painful wrench to Semmes' heart to endorse this view and forward the request to his superior in London. He had become attached to the ship, as she had brought him through many dangers. His whole nature was thrown into his tribute: "She had run me safely through two vigilant blockades, had weathered many storms, and rolled me to sleep in many calms. Her cabin was my bedroom and my study, both in one, her quarter-deck was my promenade, and her masts, spars and sails my playthings."

Tender relations had been established between

him and the force under him. As he remarks, "The commander of a ship is more or less in the position of a father of a family. He necessarily forms an attachment for those who have served under him." The bond of comradeship is also an additional link. "When men have been drenched and wind-beaten in the same storm, have stood on the deck of the same frail little ship, with only a plank between them and eternity, and watched her battling with the elements, which threaten every moment to overwhelm her, there is a feeling of brotherhood that springs up between them that it is difficult for a landsman to conceive."

These memories and associations, abstract and invisible though they be, are often more powerful than cables of steel. In spite of the pangs it brought to sunder them, preparations went forward, and before the middle of April, 1862, the men that had manned the *Sumter* dispersed, leaving her in charge of a midshipman. She was sold in a month or so, and her name changed to *Gibraltar*. She finally met her fate in the North Sea, and "her bones lie interred not far from those of the *Alabama*."

## CHAPTER IX

### ON THE "ALABAMA" AMONG THE WHALERS

"THE *Alabama* was the first steamship in the history of the world—the defective little *Sumter* excepted—that was let loose against the commerce of a great commercial people. The destruction which she caused was enormous. She . . . became famous. It was the fame of steam." In these direct terms, her daring commander does not overstate her wonderful career or the portentousness of her achievements.

Semmes had no hand in her building or in her dash for liberty from the shipyard on the Mersey. J. D. Bullock, the Confederate agent in England, had bargained with an English firm for the construction of a boat according to specifications he furnished. It was the two hundred and ninetieth order on their books since they had begun their business and hence on their records she was Number 290—an innocent name that was seized upon by thoughtless writers and speakers in the United States as an insult from Confederate sympathizers

in England, since they thus boldly proclaimed that two hundred and ninety of them had contributed to pay the expense of the fabrication of this marine destroyer. Bullock watched over her birth and growth with the interest of a fond father, as he was slated to command her. He would doubtless have made a brilliant history for her and himself, as the Confederacy was served abroad by no abler or more honorable man than he; but when his superiors gave the berth to Semmes, Bullock murmured not, and cheerfully put in his claim for the next one that might be launched. He was never to serve on the water, however; he was too much needed on land. Even with him in charge, it was only by the narrowest margin that the *Alabama* escaped, since both the consul at Liverpool and the minister to England were most alert and watchful. Evidence was secured as to her warlike build; depositions were taken and forwarded to London and laid before the Foreign Office. Communications were drawn up, reports were asked for, and the case was bandied about from office to office with all the red tape, dignity, and circumlocution that ponderous intricate organizations are capable of. Finally a responsible opinion was definitely rendered that the building of the ship was in violation of an English law, and

orders were despatched for her seizure, but too late. The indefatigable Bullock had not slept at his delicate task ; his ear was attuned to all whispers of danger.

He had got a hint, and early on the morning of July 29, 1862, he put on board the incomplected craft a gay party of ladies and gentlemen and passed down the Mersey on a trial trip. Custom house officials went along also to see that no international wrong was done. It was a complimentary jaunt enjoyed by all with a seasonable luncheon in the cabin about noon, but later a tug came alongside and the surprised party were all requested to pass over the side into her. The feast was cleared away, the bunting taken down, and there was lively bustling to get the "290" in shape for her maiden voyage on the high seas, as she was ordained never to see Liverpool again. In the darkness of the early morning of the last day of July, she turned her prow out of the bay on the coast of Wales where she had been at anchor and plowed northward through the Irish Sea, then around the north of Ireland and vanished in the broad ocean.

Charles Francis Adams, the minister from Washington to England, had steadily driven the whole engine of diplomacy to head her off. He inter-

viewed the Foreign Secretary, Lord Russell, to the limits of politeness, he placed the proofs before him of the character of the vessel in the Laird yards at Liverpool, he insisted on quickness of decision and energy of action, he called upon the United States gunboat *Tuscarora*, but it was all too late. The *Tuscarora* was down toward Queenstown, while her game was skimming on past the Giant's Causeway in her rush to begin her destiny of destruction. At that geological puzzle Bullock had landed and made his way thence to Liverpool.

Bullock had been active but prudent throughout the period of getting this cruiser afloat. Although he had been on pleasant social terms with Mr. Laird, he had never divulged his object, and that gentleman had only spoken the truth when he denied in the House of Commons all knowledge of the purpose of the boat. There were plenty of precedents in the history of the Revolutionary War for securing vessels in foreign lands to hurl against a belligerent. Franklin had done in France just what Bullock had accomplished in England. The United States authorities themselves had made overtures to Laird for obtaining some steamers soon after the Civil War started. But the time limit set was too short, as the firm was already overburdened

with work. With such examples and under such difficulties went forth this

“ Beautiful steamship, pride of the seas,  
Decked for the battle and rigged for the breeze.”<sup>1</sup>

In the meantime the captain of this future “ scourge of commerce ” was restlessly searching another chance to strike at the enemy. After laying up the *Sumter* in Gibraltar, Semmes sailed for England, and got in touch with the Confederate representatives there. He soon saw there was no prospect of another ship for him, as it was the understanding that Bullock was to have the “ 290 ” as soon as she left the yards. Semmes went to Nassau on an English boat, with the aim of dashing through the blockade, returning to the South and fighting on land, if he could not get into his own element again. But shortly after reaching Nassau he was instructed by the Confederate Secretary of the Navy to return to England and to take charge of the new cruiser. It was an anxious time for him,—waiting to catch a neutral bottom to Europe. But he sent a message to the efficient Bullock to push all work on the *Alabama* with as much care and thoroughness as if he himself were to be her guide.

<sup>1</sup> *Colburn's Magazine*, Vol. 168, p. 498.



Finally, the first week in August Semmes himself reached Bullock. With his corps of officers, a few days afterward, all set out in a boat, previously engaged by Bullock, for the Azores, the appointed rendezvous. Another vessel, freighted with munitions and supplies for the *Alabama*, had been already ordered to these islands. These half-way resting houses are a peaceful haven for the mariner and an alluring sight to the eye of man. Nature smiled on the carefully tilled hills, "the red-tiled roofs, sharp gables, and parti-colored verandas." Little wonder if it was horrible to Porter that from "this beautiful spot, where it seemed as if nothing unlawful could exist, started forth one of the most devastating expeditions against a nation's commerce known in the history of war." Here in sight of these green-clad slopes and summits, amid the sun flashes from the waves, with enchanting peacefulness above and around, the last touches were put on the *Alabama*, that had struggled for nine days with the gales and swells of the Atlantic after escaping from the Irish Sea.

Her English captain, immediately after coming to, set his crew ostensibly to repairing the machinery, as he claimed he was disabled by the storms, but really to make all ready for the arma-

ment that he knew was on the way. The Portuguese authorities looked on suspiciously; he swore at them, bullied them, and continued his work with added energy. With the coming of the other two vessels, the harbor officials became more and more inquisitive, and although the pitiful plea was made that one of the consorts was sinking and all hands were feverishly straining themselves to lighten her and save her, all three were forced to go outside. With some deception, much boldness, a little defiance, unceasing toil of the crews, and racking vigilance and apprehension on the part of Semmes lest an enemy appear before he was armed, the *Alabama* was finally gotten into shape.

John Laird, her creator, declared she was "the finest cruiser of her class in the world." To the great sea leader on the other side of the civil conflict, Porter, "she was the most dangerous machine to be used against American commerce ever yet planned." In the opinion of one of her officers, Sinclair, she was "fitted out with the most careful and astute provision, . . . had unusual resources within herself, such as no other man-of-war of the day could boast. She carried the means for making all ordinary repairs upon her machinery, spars, and armament while at sea, or in

ports where mechanical facilities could not be commanded."

At his first glance in these Portuguese waters, her master saw "she was indeed a beautiful thing to look upon." His home and his floating fortress for more than a score of months, she deserves a more material description. Thus has Semmes given it:<sup>1</sup>

"She was about nine hundred tons burden, two hundred and thirty feet in length, thirty-two feet in breadth, twenty feet in depth, and drew, when provisioned and coaled for a cruise, fifteen feet of water. Her model was of the most perfect symmetry, and she sat upon the water with the lightness and grace of a swan. She was barkentine rigged, with long lower masts, which enabled her to carry large fore-and-aft sails, as jibs and try sails, which are of so much importance to a steamer, in so many emergencies. Her sticks were of the best yellow pine, that would bend in a gale like a willow wand without breaking, and her rigging was of the best Swedish iron wire. The scantling of the vessel was light, compared with vessels of her class in the Federal Navy, but this was scarcely a disadvantage, as she was designed as a scourge of the enemy's commerce rather than for battle. She was to defend herself simply, if defense should become necessary. Her engine was of three hundred horse power and she had attached an apparatus for condensing from the vapor of sea water all the fresh water that her crew might require.

"She was a perfect steamer and a perfect sailing

<sup>1</sup> "Nav. Hist. of Civil War," p. 628.

ship at the same time, neither of her two modes of locomotion being at all dependent upon the other. . . . The *Sumter*, when her fuel was exhausted, was little better than a log on the water because of her inability to hoist her propeller, which she was in consequence compelled to dray after her. The *Alabama* was so constructed that in fifteen minutes her propeller could be detached from the shaft, and lifted in a well contrived for the purpose, sufficiently high out of the water not to be an impediment to her speed. When this was done and her sails spread, she was to all intents and purposes a sailing ship. On the other hand, when I desired to use her as a steamer, I had only to start the fires, lower the propeller, and if the wind was adverse, brace her yards to the wind, and the conversion was complete. The speed of the *Alabama* was always greatly overrated by the enemy. She was ordinarily about a ten-knot ship. She was said to have made eleven knots and a half on her trial trip, but we never afterward got it out of her. Under steam and sail both we logged on one occasion thirteen knots and a quarter, which was her utmost speed.

“Her armament consisted of eight guns; six 32-pounders, in broadside, and two pivot guns amidships; one on the forecastle, and the other abaft the mainmast—the former a 100-pounder rifled Blakeley, and the latter a smooth bore eight-inch. The Blakeley gun was so deficient in metal compared with the weight of shot it threw that after the first few discharges, when it became a little heated, it was of comparatively small use to us, to such an extent were we compelled to reduce the charge of powder on account of the recoil. The average crew of the *Alabama* before the mast was

about one hundred and twenty men ; and she carried twenty-four officers. The cost of the ship with everything complete was about \$250,000."

Such was the boat, put in commission in mid-Atlantic, beyond all human jurisdiction, with a few lonely islands in sight. A graphic pen-picture has Semmes given us of the event :

"The ship having been properly prepared we steamed out, on this bright Sunday morning, under a cloudless sky, with a gentle breeze from the south-east scarcely ruffling the surface of the placid sea ; and, under the shadow of the smiling and picturesque island Terceira, which nature seemed to have decked specially for the occasion, so charming did it appear in its checkered dress of a lighter and darker green, composed of corn-fields and orange groves, the flag of the new-born Confederate states was unfurled for the first time from the peak of the *Alabama*. . . . The ceremony was short but impressive. The officers were all in full uniform, and the crew neatly dressed. I caused 'all hands' to be summoned aft on the quarter-deck, and, mounting a gun carriage, I read the commission of Mr. Jefferson Davis appointing me a captain in the Confederate States Navy, and the order of Mr. Stephen R. Mallory, the Secretary of the Navy, directing me to assume command of the *Alabama*. Following my example the officers and crew had all uncovered their heads, in deference to the sovereign authority, as is customary on such occasions ; as they stood in respectful silence and listened with rapt attention to the reading and to the short explanation of my

object and purposes in putting the ship in commission which followed, I was impressed with the spectacle.

“While the reading was going on, two small balls might have been seen ascending slowly, one to the peak, and the other to the main-royal masthead. These balls were so arranged that, by a sudden jerk of the halliards by which they had been sent aloft, the flag and pennant would unfold themselves to the breeze. A curious observer would also have seen a quartermaster standing by the English colors, which we were still bearing, ready to strike them, a band of music on the quarter-deck, and a gunner (lock-string in hand) standing by the weather-bow gun. All these men had their eyes upon the reader; and when he had concluded, at a wave of his hand, the gun was fired, the change of flags took place, and the air was rent by a deafening cheer from officers and men: the band at the same time playing ‘Dixie,’ that soul-stirring national anthem of the new-born government. Thus amid this peaceful scene of beauty, with all nature smiling upon the ceremony, was the *Alabama* christened; the name ‘290’ disappearing with the English flag.”

In this way on Sunday, August 24, 1862, was born the *Alabama*; on another Sunday a little over a score of months later she died.

It was an anxious moment after Semmes had made his address inviting seamen from the crews to enlist. He had enticingly stated the case to them, briefly describing the cause of the South as a struggle for liberty, painting the delights of strange

skies and foreign ports with "liberty on shore," and mentioning the prospects for combat with the foe. Especially careful had he been to emphasize the financial side,—the unusually good rate of pay he offered them, and the chances for big prize money if all turned out successfully. He must have been eloquent if results were the test, as he got nearly all the available fellows, or eighty out of the total of ninety. It was a happy ending for the first and only "stump speech" ever made to the crew of the *Alabama*. Semmes, Bullock, and the British captain were all kept busy till late that night arranging matters for the newly-enlisted men, so they could make remittances home. Semmes was gratified that so many were married, as he felt that for this reason he could rely on them all the more.

It was a motley company at the start, becoming more so as desertions were made good at the various ports visited. Kell found that among the English, Dutch, Irish, and Spanish, were a few Yankee tars, and a nucleus of Southern pilots from Charleston, Savannah, and New Orleans, but all in all, he declared, "a braver and more willing crew never floated." They were ready to dare all for their commander, and begged him to get another deck after the loss of the *Alabama* so they could sail with

him again. One of the number has portrayed them as lawless, turbulent, wild as animals, and defiant of all rule, but he also testifies to the firmness and decisiveness of the captain, and his spirit of iron rule when mutiny seemed imminent. The twenty months at sea, with a long series of prizes, are an answer to all criticism of proper control.

Late that night Bullock parted from Semmes, noting a propitious horoscope in all nature in spite of his depression. "With heartfelt prayers for his success, I stepped over the *Alabama's* side with feelings very much akin to those which oppress a man when he leaves his home behind him. The heavens were brilliant with stars, a blazing comet illuminated the sky to the northwest, the lanterns of the *Alabama* gleamed brightly as she rose and fell to the sea ; the signs were all favorably ominous and, banishing every sentiment but hope, I predicted a glorious cruise for the dashing little craft and her gallant commander." Confident was he in another despatch to his superior, when he said of Semmes, "You will not be long in hearing of his movements."<sup>1</sup>

Bullock was prophetic, though there was a short delay. Semmes had not only a new crew, but also

<sup>1</sup> "Naval War Records," Series I, Vol. I, p. 776.



almost a new staff of officers. Kell, his right hand man on the *Sumter*, was the same for him on the *Alabama*, but the other lieutenants were replaced by Armstrong, Wilson, Low, and Sinclair, the last of whom has left a lively account of life on shipboard. Galt, the *Sumter's* surgeon, and Freeman, the former chief engineer, filled the same posts on the *Alabama*. Llewellyn, an Englishman, as assistant surgeon, and Bulloch, brother of the *Alabama's* designer, were in the list. In addition one renegade slipped in, Semmes admitted with shame, the paymaster, who tried to tamper with the crew with a view to mutiny. He was discharged, and then went over to the other side, his place being filled by Galt.

Leisure was needed for drilling the organization into a compact mass, so that each part would know its place, and all could work in harmony. Semmes withdrew therefore "under easy sail, from the beaten tracks of commerce," and devoted "several days to the exercise of the crew, as well at general as at division quarters." He accounted it fortunate that some of his sailors had served on men-of-war.

The boat herself had been built of green lumber, and under the warm sun timbers began to warp and yaw. The men got to know all about calking.

The guns also were put in shape, and tried out with some blank cartridges.

It was soon seen that the *Alabama* was a fine sailer, a thing she abundantly proved afterward, as she made all of her captures except half a dozen with her propeller out of water. She could never have become the terror she did if she had relied on steam, as she carried only eighteen days' fuel. Her radius of action would have been so limited if she had been forced to go into port every two or three weeks to recoal, that she would have been soon caught or badly crippled in her movements.

But she had finally preened and plumed herself, and was ready for a dash at the whalers around the Azores, a field which, though open to the bold adventurers of all countries, was almost entirely preempted by the New England boats. These waters do not themselves produce the food for these monsters of the deep. Their supplies are grown in the warmer regions of the tropics, and are brought to these feeding areas by the currents. The hunting here ends about the first of October, when the winter gales begin. There were only a few weeks left for Semmes to deal his fatal strokes, and he lost no further time. Early on September 25th, he ran across the *Ocmulgee*, and astonished the captain by

showing the Confederate colors. She was busy with a huge whale alongside, within one hundred miles of where the *Alabama* had been commissioned eleven days before. Semmes did not want to alarm other boats in the whaling industry, and although he had removed all the stores that he wanted from his prize by nine o'clock the night of the capture, he waited till the next day to start his bonfire. He ran in near the island of Flores and landed his prisoners in their own boats, allowing them to take what stores they desired.

Hardly had this been done, when another sail was seen making for the protecting zone of the marine league around the island. She did not show her colors, but to the keen eyes on the *Alabama* she was American in every feature. She gamely held on her way in spite of the warning from a blank cartridge. After humoring her a few minutes longer, Semmes sent a round shot whistling through her rigging. The crew of seven were all put in irons, in retaliation for the treatment that Semmes' paymaster, Myers, had received after his capture in Tangier. The passengers aboard were permitted to remain, with a prize crew in control, till the next day, when they with the prisoners were landed.

Setting out again Semmes overhauled a Portuguese

“whaling brig,” the only foreign whaler he ever held up. There were practically none engaged in this business except Americans, all the others having been driven out in fair, free contest by the “superior skill, energy, industry, courage and perseverance of the Yankee whaler, who is perhaps the best specimen of a sailer the world over.” Such is Semmes’ spontaneous tribute to the noble worth and character of his foes, a tribute coming from him in spite of his hostility to the government of the section which sent them forth.

But the day was not lost. That afternoon he bagged the *Ocean Rover*, a large craft on her way home to Massachusetts, with eleven hundred barrels of oil, after a cruise of over three years. To Semmes’ poetic nature pathos tempered the pride of victory. He could not help feeling a sympathy for this gallant fellow homeward bound to his wife and “babies,” after his long separation. But the master did not mope over his misfortune. When he heard that the *Ocmulgee* men had been allowed to pull to freedom on the island he asked for the same favor, declaring that the distance of four or five miles was nothing. “We whalers sometimes chase a whale on the broad sea until our ship is hull down, and think nothing of it. It will relieve you

of us the sooner and be of some service to us besides."

The water was smooth, the chance good to be rid of prisoners, and Semmes gave permission for the boats to be loaded with provisions and personal effects. The delighted fellows worked like beavers, and in a couple of hours the six boats, manned by six each, were alongside waiting for the word of release. Semmes says: "I could not but be amused when I looked over the side into these boats at the amount of plunder that the rapacious fellow had packed in them. They were literally loaded down with all sorts of traps, from the seamen's chests and bedding to the tabby cat and parrot. Nor had the main chance been overlooked, for all the 'cabin stores' had been secured, and sundry barrels of beef and pork besides. I said to him, 'Captain, your boats appear to me to be rather deeply laden; are you not afraid to trust them?' 'Oh, no,' he replied, 'they are as buoyant as ducks, and we shall not ship a drop of water.'" After being paroled, they shoved off, and set out to row to land.

The scene and the occasion touched Semmes' strain of sentiment, and he has painted it all for us tenderly: "That night landing of this whaler's

crew was a beautiful spectacle. I stood on the horse-block watching it, my mind busy with many thoughts. The moon was shining brightly, though there were some passing clouds sailing lazily in the upper air that flecked the sea. Flores, which was sending off to us, even at this distance, her perfumes of shrub and flower, lay sleeping in the moonlight, with a few fleecy white clouds round the mountain top like a turban. The rocky islets that rise like so many shafts out of the sea, devoid of all vegetation, and at different distances from the shore, looked weird and unearthly, like sheeted ghosts. The boats moving swiftly and mysteriously toward the shore might have been mistaken when they had gotten a little distance from us for Venetian gondolas, with their peaked bows and sterns, especially when we heard coming over the sea a song sung by a powerful and musical voice and chorused by all the boats. Those merry fellows were thus making light of misfortune, and proving that the sailor after all is the true philosopher. The echo of that night song lingered long in my memory, but I little dreamed as I stood on the deck of the *Alabama* and witnessed the scene I have described, that four years afterward it would be quoted against me as a violation of the law of war. And yet so it was.

It was alleged . . . that miles away at sea, in rough and inclement weather, I compelled my prisoners to depart for the shore, in leaky and unsound boats, at the hazard of their lives, designing and desiring to drown them. And this was all the thanks I received for setting some of these fellows up as nabobs among the islanders. Why, the master of the *Ocean Rover*, with his six boats and their cargoes, was richer than the governor, when he landed in Flores; where the simple islanders are content with a few head of cattle, a cast net and a canoe."

Semmes was right; this act and the romance of this flight to land were considered at first most damaging to him when the Navy Department was searching for evidence against him as he lay in jail in Washington in the early part of 1866. Happily for the judicial calm of the legal adviser, the case was investigated, and the actors cheerfully exonerated him from all blame.

Conscious of having dealt generously with the defeated, Semmes of course could feel none of these apprehensions, and turned in and slept soundly till aroused at midnight to be informed that a large ship was near. Without disturbing the regular routine of officers and crew, as it was his rule in

such cases to use only those on customary duty unless in an emergency, Semmes came on deck and supervised the chase himself. It was a close race for four hours, as she was hurrying for the shelter of the marine league, and disdained to heed a blank cartridge. But a thirty-two pound shot behind her stern gave her such a drenching that she hauled up at once.

She was the *Alert* from Connecticut, out only sixteen days, with an ample outfit to reach a whaling station in the islands of the South Indian Ocean. It was a very opportune catch for Semmes as he got from her a quantity of clothing, canned meats, and tobacco. The crew was sent ashore in their own boats, and the *Alabama* tars smoked to their fill of good "Virginia twist."

As he could take no prizes into a neutral port, there were soon three pyres burning around Semmes at the same time. A fresh boat, seeing that the triple volumes of smoke came from vessels afire, wheeled and made off, but not fast enough, and he soon had the *Weatherguage*, a whaler from Massachusetts. Perhaps her crew enjoyed that night as the *Alabama* bayed after more flying prey-until dawn, only to discover then that she had been pursuing a Dane for Hamburg. The poor, tired



*Alabama* could only limp back on her tracks, and cheer herself with destroying her prize, the *Weather-guage*, after landing the crew.

No other excitement followed for two days, then the *Alabama* met the *Altamaha*, which had been out only five months and had but little oil. It was a stirring run the ensuing night under a soft moonlight after the *Benjamin Tucker*, eight months from home, with over three hundred barrels of oil, and, what was still more welcome, some tobacco. As soon as she stopped, Semmes turned in to conclude his nap, leaving the boarding party to finish operations. Within the next four days, three other "birds of the sea" were caught; the *Courser*, which was first devoted to target practice, the *Virginia*, whose name did not save her, and the *Elisha Dunbar*, which last was taken on September 18, 1862. The capture of the *Dunbar* seriously tested the *Alabama's* powers in bad weather, as a stiff breeze was whipping the ocean into buffeting waves. Semmes was charmed with the ship's behavior. He says: "It was soon quite evident that my gallant little ship was entirely at home in the roughest weather. She seemed, like a trained racer, to enjoy the sport, and though she would tremble now and then, as she leaped from sea to sea, it was the tremor of excite-

ment, not of weakness." The wind was fierce but there were daring souls with Semmes who would risk all whenever he gave command. The boarding squad went down with the wind and after applying the torch continued with the same help to the *Alabama* which had manœvered to windward of the prize.

It was the last whaler to be got, and nature angrily helped to celebrate the event: "This burning ship was a beautiful spectacle, the scene being wild and picturesque beyond description. The black clouds were mustering their forces in fearful array. Already the entire heavens had been overcast. The thunder began to roll and crash, and the lightning to leap from cloud to cloud in a thousand eccentric lines. The sea was in a tumult of rage; the winds howled and the floods of rain descended. Amid this turmoil of the elements, the *Dunbar*, all in flames, and with disordered gear and unfurled canvas, lay rolling and tossing upon the sea. Now an ignited sail would fly away from a yard, and scud off before the gale; and now the yard itself, released from the control of its braces, would swing about wildly as if in the madness of despair, and then drop into the sea. Finally the masts went by the board, and then the hull rocked to and fro a while

until it was filled with water, and the fire nearly quenched, when it settled to the bottom of the great deep, a victim to the passions of man and the fury of the elements."

## CHAPTER X

### THE SINKING OF THE "HATTERAS"

THE storm that had sounded the dirge of the *Dunbar* heralded a series of similar disturbances that put an end to the whaling season several days earlier than usual. Semmes set out for new pastures, the Grand Banks of Newfoundland, to intercept the great American "junk fleet," or bearers of the grain from the Mississippi valley to the hungry mouths of Europe. Fortunately stocks of heavier clothing had been got from the whaler in time for this excursion northward. Semmes was all the time very thoughtful of the health and welfare of his men, and during his career on both boats never lost a man by disease, though he had in all some five hundred in his crew and two thousand prisoners.

Good luck went with him into the Gulf Stream; in the first half of October he took seven vessels: *Brilliant*, *Emily Farnum*, *Wave Crest*, *Dunkirk*, *Tonawanda*, *Manchester*, and *Lamplighter*. All were burned except the *Farnum* which had neutral cargo, and the *Tonawanda* which had some sixty

passengers, one-half being women and children. Although chivalrous to the weak, Semmes did not want the *Alabama* converted into a nursery, and the stewards set to feeding babies. He kept her by under a prize crew, hoping for some vessel with neutral freight to come along ; but, no such fortune turning up, he was compelled by the circumstances to give her freedom under a ransom bond. There were English goods on the *Manchester*, but they were not so documented. The owners afterward wanted their government to make a diplomatic contention based on this fact, but were informed by the English Secretary of Foreign Affairs that they must "look for redress to the country of the captor," as that was the principle in the law of nations, when there was no evidence that the material was the property of an outsider.

Semmes was now so constantly hailing vessels out of American ports that his mail was almost as regular as if he had been on land, often tri-weekly and sometimes daily. It was his habit to scan the papers for news of the movements of opposing vessels, and thus learn how to escape traps and avoid dangers. In his diary of October 12th, he notes that, according to the New York *Herald* of October 5th, of one hundred and ninety-two of "the enemy's

gunboats" only thirteen were superior in force to him. After he had extracted what he considered the essentials, he passed the papers on to the officers and then to the crew. Some of the younger members of the staff got to expect the morning news at every breakfast, and when "it was not forthcoming, they would wonder what the d—l the *Alabama* had been about the past night that she had not gotten hold of a mail." Of course many batches of papers were generously furnished him by boats of other nationalities which he would hold up. All the letters Semmes opened himself, as his right under the laws of war, and scanned them for any confidential relation either as to the progress of the war or on the character of the cargo aboard.

Twice during this time did he feel himself in jeopardy. Once he unlimbered his guns and cleared for action with what he thought was a United States war-vessel, but she turned out to be Spanish. Still he was pleased with the creditable showing of his men in making the ship ready.<sup>1</sup> It was a furious cyclonic gale that most endangered the safety of all. This lasted over four hours, the vortex passing over the ship, which hardly changed her position while the wind came upon her from opposite directions for

<sup>1</sup> "Naval War Records," Series I, Vol. I, p. 795.

two hours at a time in turn. She rode through the storm almost buoyantly, though all hands were set to repairing minor damages the next day.

For several days after this outburst of the elements, there were no captures. By this time the *Alabama's* force had become "very expert in detecting the nationalities of ships." One of the subordinate officers was unusually good in this respect, and scarcely ever made a mistake. Only once did he blunder in declaring a boat "Yankee," and that one had been built in Canada, and consequently had all the earmarks of ships constructed in the United States. Not only did Semmes see something distinctive and excellent about the American ships that he was destroying, but he frankly admired "the seamanship of my enemies." "The Yankee," he said, "is certainly a remarkable specimen of the *genus homo*. He is at once a duck and a chicken, and takes to the water or to the land with equal facility."

Neither were the merchants without dexterity and shrewdness as Semmes now began to find out. After the word of his first captures in the Gulf Stream reached the shippers, they started in to "cover cargoes" with certificates of foreign ownership. Knotty questions came up before "The Confederate States Admiralty Court held on the Confederate

States Steamer *Alabama* on the High Seas." Some plain-spoken persons on the other side indignantly declared that this august tribunal consisted of one man only, Captain Raphael Semmes, commanding the *Alabama*. Of course there could be no appeal from his decision, but so thorough was his mastery of the law touching such matters, and so careful was he of the rights of neutrals, that it is safe to say that he would never have been overruled, even if his cases had been taken to a regularly constituted unprejudiced court on land. He would sit in his cabin, hear evidence, examine the ship's papers, render his decisions and enter formal decrees on his records. The attempts at deception were often very apparent, especially at first. Some blanket document would be exhibited to the effect that all the cargo belonged to neutrals or to subjects of His Majesty, the King of Italy, or to subjects of Great Britain or some other country. Again the goods would be consigned to a firm abroad, but subject to the order of the consignor, thus of course making them the property of the merchant in the American port. Semmes was charged by the New York newspapers with deciding such matters very abruptly, even profanely, but he would have been justified in his impatience with such fraudulent impositions.



Thanks to the enterprise of the American reporter and editor, Semmes was apprised in the last week of October that several gunboats were rushing out of New York harbor after him. He turned southward and westward ; or, as he puts it, " while they are running from New York, I am running toward it." He had another reason for this move ; he boldly aimed to make a capture almost in the very face of the metropolis, and actually got within two hundred and twenty miles of the city when he was forced to give up his daring scheme as his coal would last only four days longer.<sup>1</sup>

After adding the *Lafayette*, *Crenshaw*, *Lauretta*, *Baron de Castine*, and *Levi Starbuck* to his spoils, Semmes got more than he had counted on in the *T. B. Wales*, an East India trader, because she carried several lady passengers and children, the family of the captain, and an ex-consul on his return home. Semmes gallantly allowed them to bring all their wardrobes aboard without any inspection, and some of his lieutenants relinquished their quarters for these prisoners. The boat assumed a domestic air with the cries of childish voices and the pattering of tiny feet. The ex-consul at least, if not the others, appreciated the kindness

<sup>1</sup> " Naval War Records," Series I, Vol. I, p. 802.

all received, and when Semmes, because of unreasoning hatred, seemed under the shadow of the gallows some years later he volunteered himself as a witness in Semmes' behalf.

The *Wales* proved almost a floating shipyard, as she provided spars and rigging to replace the losses incurred in the terrific storms of the Gulf Stream. Her main-yard "was almost of the precise dimensions of that of the *Alabama*," which had been carried away in the cyclone of the middle of October. Best of all, perhaps, there were eight recruits from her for the *Alabama*, bringing her complement nearly to the standard of one hundred and twenty. Having despoiled her of all he wanted, Semmes let the torch finish the work.

It was ten days before his cramped quarters were relieved of the congestion. He passed along the coast of the island of Dominica, which had looked so soft and peaceful to him just a year before when he made his escape from the *Iroquois* in the slow little *Sumter*. He lowered his propeller, put on steam, glided by in sight of St. Pierre, and shortly after dropped anchor in Fort de France, on the 18th of November, 1862. This was the *Alabama's* first harbor since her baptism off Terceira not quite three months before.

The prospect of leave ashore and the smuggling of liquor aboard were too much for his irresponsible crew. They burst all bonds, defied all discipline and tried to disable their officers. But Semmes mastered the riot. He left his dinner and came on deck, had the lieutenant "beat to quarters," and passed along the platoons. All drunken men were arrested, taken to the gangway, and doused rapidly with buckets of water. It only amused them at first, and they swore all the more volubly, but Semmes had tried this method and knew it would be entirely efficacious if kept up long and rapidly enough. They soon began to gasp for breath and then to shiver, then to beg for mercy and to promise to behave ever afterward. For two hours the treatment was applied and then all were docile and penitent. This, the only semblance of mutiny on the *Alabama*, was effectively quelled because as the sailors put it: "Old Beeswax was hell upon watering a fellow's grog."

This little flare up did not delay the execution of the purpose of Semmes' call to port. The indefatigable Bullock had despatched the coal ship, and it had arrived several days before, in ample time for her loquacious Scotch master to divulge her mission. Semmes expected a gunboat to be nosing about, and

he shrewdly sent the coal ship out to a small island. Before he followed her, the *San Jacinto* came up, and made all preparations for combat. Semmes had no intention of meeting her as she had twice as much metal as the *Alabama*, but he felt no alarm because he knew she was only an "old wagon of a ship" for speed.

The weather was far kinder to the *Alabama* than to the *Sumter* a year before, as the night was dark and rainy. Semmes was very cool about it as we see in his narration : " We ran up our boats, lighted our fires, and when the steam was ready, got under way, as we would have done on any ordinary occasion, except only that there were no lights permitted to be seen about the ship, and that the guns were loaded and cast loose, and the crew at quarters. In the afternoon, a French naval officer had come on board, kindly bringing me a chart of the harbor, from which it appeared I could run out in almost any direction I might choose. I chose the most southern route, and giving my ship a full head of steam, we passed out without so much as getting a glimpse of the *San Jacinto*." In fact so neatly was the escape effected that, according to a British subordinate, the *San Jacinto* remained there, looking around for four days and nights before discovering that the

quarry had eluded him, and was free from all pursuit.<sup>1</sup>

Semmes tranquilly sailed on to Blanquilla, a small coral island off the coast of Venezuela, barren except for a few goats pastured there by some herders from the mainland. There he found a whaling schooner boiling out blubber on the beach. As he was within the saving grace of the marine league, he could only frighten the skipper by divulging to him the dreaded name of the *Alabama*, and ordering him not to depart before she did. "He gladly assented to these terms," and, although an enemy, came on board in a quite friendly manner.

Here the *Alabama* lay for five days "coaling ship and getting ready for another cruise." It was thoroughly safe to let the crew go on land as there were neither bar-rooms nor dance-halls in the place. Peaceful picnics, happy fishing trips, and successful hunts for water fowl, while not so exciting as evenings in a port, were far more healthful for the crew, and more conducive to discipline. The whole ship was put in the best physical condition.

It was necessary to have men and material in the highest state of efficiency, as Semmes had determined on a very daring deed. From the energetic Ameri-

<sup>1</sup> *Cornhill Magazine*, May, 1897.

can newspapers, got from his captures, he had learned of General Banks's expedition against Texas, with his rendezvous at Galveston. He knew a large number of transports would set out for that port. As the water over the bar was only twelve feet, the most of them would have to anchor outside. It was his aim to make a night raid on them and throw the whole into such confusion that they would fall afoul of each other, when many would be burned or sunk and the whole fleet crippled. If he could attack the armed convoys unexpectedly, they would be off guard and would likely not be very harmful to him. He was very hopeful of this as the press had spread it far that the *Alabama* "was well on her way to the coast of Brazil and the East Indies." He was sure no passing vessel had noted his presence at Blanquilla, so he might slip into the Gulf of Mexico without detection, if all went well.

But Banks would not arrive at his destination till about the tenth of January, and as it was now only the latter part of November, there were several weeks for active work meanwhile. A good diversion to fill in this time would be the capture of a California treasure-steamer. He reflected how much the Southern cause could be encouraged and aided by a deposit of a million or so of gold in European

capitals, to be drawn on for new *Alabamas*, rams, and ironclads.

After directing his coal consort to repair to Arcas, a desert island on the Gulf coast of the peninsula of Yucatan, so as to refurnish him about Christmas for his final dash at Galveston, Semmes set out for the east end of Cuba. He thought the passage there more likely for the California boats than the one at the west end of the island. On the way he caught the *Parker Cooke*, a godsend to the *Alabama*, as she was full of crackers, bread, butter, meats, and dried fruits. After she had been despoiled, she lighted her captor's passage until near midnight. Five days later, the *Union* came along to break the monotony, but happily for her, she had neutral property aboard, and hence was dismissed under ransom bond.

Some forty-eight hours later, on December 7, 1862, high hopes were followed by deepest disappointment. As all hands were getting ready for the usual Sunday morning muster, a musical voice floated down from aloft of "Sail ho!" and a large steamer was sighted. All were sure of the California gold, but she was going in the wrong direction. As the ships neared each other, the stranger's upper deck was seen crowded with passengers, male and female, the uniforms, veils, gay dresses, and fluttering ribbons

making a bright, joyous scene, soon to be one of fright and consternation. She did not heed a blank cartridge except to put on steam and speed, but a round shot splintered her mast, caused a wild panic among the ladies and a scampering below, and brought the ship to at once. Instead of gold, Semmes got what he little knew how to take care of, as there were five hundred women and children on the ship, besides a squad of marines. He paroled the latter, and sent his handsomest young officer aboard, in his nattiest uniform, to calm the nerves of the ladies. This officer was so gallant that all fear and alarm disappeared, and his coat buttons were cut off as mementoes of the occasion. So polite were all on both sides that the entire cabin, at his request, drank the health of Jefferson Davis, but a bright American girl on the other side evened up matters by roguishly proposing a toast to Abraham Lincoln, which the chivalrous officer had to accept amid the hurrahs of all.<sup>1</sup> Such was the festive air on the *Ariel*, which Semmes kept by him for several days with a view to transferring all the souls to some neutral bottom. None coming, however, he was forced to send her away under written obligation, since he could not take her into any port.

<sup>1</sup> Sinclair, "Two Years on the *Alabama*," p. 59.



An accident to her engine was responsible for the *Alabama's* withdrawing from the tracks of commerce, and keeping still like a wounded animal for a couple of days. Her engineer was skilful, and mended the very serious break. Then she went on to the Arcas Island to coal and gird herself for the sortie against Banks's expedition for Galveston. Luck was with Semmes, as he spoke no sail after leaving the vicinity of Jamaica, and slipped to his breathing quarters unseen by any eye, either on land or water.

Two days before Christmas he was alongside the faithful *Agrippina*, and ceased his wanderings for a week, "coaling ship, refitting, and repainting," careening her over, and scrubbing her bottom below the water line. The *Alabama* was soon in such excellent trim that the sailors affectionately said of her that she could be made to do anything but talk.

Like a racer trained almost to a razor edge, she was ready for this daring venture into the midst of a fleet of vessels of unknown speed and armament. Porter generously renders his meed of admiration for the audacity of the move. It was "a bold and feasible plan," he says, "and no one can deny that Semmes displayed great daring in thus bearding the

lion in his den, and entering waters that he knew to be full of his enemy's gunboats."<sup>1</sup>

The run up the Gulf was uneventful, and the crew, off duty, killed time as best they could, reading, playing games, and telling yarns. But the most entertaining diversion was the speculations as to the amount of prize money each would receive from the lump appropriation the Confederate Congress would vote for the total value of all the captures made, after the cruise was ended.

Excitement climbed to its greatest height on the afternoon of the eleventh of January (1863) when they got in sight of a lot of ships off Galveston. It was the crafty scheme to hover near until night, and then dart into the immense fleet, for which the lookout had been instructed to scan the horizon. He soon cried, "Sail ho!" "Land ho!" but no transports were in sight—only five war steamers. Presently, one of these threw a shell over the city, and the dream of devastation of the foe's sail melted away. The South had retaken Galveston, and Banks's huge armada had put into New Orleans instead.

Semmes surmised all this, and he pondered over his predicament. It would shock the *morale* of his

<sup>1</sup> "Nav. Hist. Civ. War," p. 639.

men, undermine their faith in him, to run away without striking a blow, and yet it would be foolhardy, even suicidal, to pit himself against five adversaries, any one perhaps his equal. But one of the opposing force relieved all his perplexity by coming out after him. That was what Semmes desired. He had no wish for an engagement so near the others, and he slowly moved seaward. He turned his propeller slowly, even stopping it at times, and thus decoyed his pursuer some twenty miles from his comrades. Then, he says, "I furled my sails, beat to quarters, prepared my ship for action, and wheeled to meet him. The two ships now approached each other very rapidly. As we came within speaking distance, we simultaneously stopped our engines, the ships being about one hundred yards apart. The enemy was the first to hail. 'What ship is that?' cried he. 'This is her Britannic Majesty's *Petrel*,' we replied. We now hailed in turn and demanded to know who he was. The reply not coming to us very distinctly, we repeated our question, when we heard the words, 'This is the United States ship ——,' the name of the ship being lost to us. But we had heard enough. All that we wanted to know was that the stranger was a United States ship, and therefore our enemy.

A pause now ensued, a rather awkward pause, as the reader may suppose. Presently the stranger hailed again, and said, 'If you please, I will send a boat on board of you.' His object of course was to verify or discredit the answer we had given him, that we were one of her Britannic Majesty's cruisers. We replied, 'Certainly, we shall be happy to receive your boat;' and we heard a boatswain's mate call away a boat, and could hear the creaking of the tackles, as she was lowered into the water.

"Things were now come to a crisis, and it being useless to delay our engagement with the enemy any longer, I turned to my first lieutenant and said, 'I suppose you are all ready for action.' 'We are,' he replied; 'the men are eager to begin and are only waiting for the word.' I said, 'Tell the enemy who we are for we must not strike him in disguise, and when you have done so, give him the broadside.' Kell now sang out in his powerful clarion voice through his trumpet, 'This is the Confederate States Steamer *Alabama*,' and . . . gave the order, 'Fire!'"

The men had been instructed beforehand that the signal to fire would be "Alabama," and hence immediately they poured a broadside into the *Hatteras*.

The English sailors on the *Alabama* had been nettled at reading in New York papers the slurring references to the low character of the crew, and they took this occasion to season their shots with pungent comments, such as, "That's from the scum of England." "That's a British pill for you to swallow."

One of the officers reports that Semmes stood calmly on his quarter-deck throughout the engagement with the shot flying about him, encouraging the gunners by word and gesture: "Give it to the rascals. Fire low, men. Don't be all night sinking that fellow!" Of course he did not know whether he was fighting an ironclad or a ram.

The *Alabama* fought with her starboard broadside and the *Hatteras* with her port. Semmes was highly pleased with the steadiness of his force, as they "handled their pieces with great spirit and commendable coolness, and the action was sharp and exciting while it lasted, which, however, was not very long, for in just thirteen minutes after firing the first gun, the enemy hoisted a light and discharged an off-gun as a signal that he had been beaten. We at once withheld our fire, and such a cheer went up from the brazen throats of my fellows as must have astonished even a Texan if he had heard it."

The captain of the *Hatteras* wrote a concise, manly account of his defeat, indulging in no heat of feeling or animosity aside from a reference to "piratical craft" and "rebel steamer," making in all what Semmes frankly admitted was "a pretty fair report of the engagement." He pointed out what Semmes generously granted, that "the great superiority of the *Alabama*, with her powerful battery and her machinery under water line" made victory a foregone conclusion. To his antagonist he "behaved like a man of courage and made the best fight he could."

The *Hatteras* was one hundred tons larger than the *Alabama*, with eight guns and a crew of one hundred and eight; the *Alabama* had nine guns and a crew of one hundred and ten, but there was considerable disparity in favor of the *Alabama* "in the weight of the pivot guns, and the *Alabama* ought to have won the fight," says her commander. There were two men killed and five wounded on the *Hatteras*, and one man wounded, only slightly, on the *Alabama*. Semmes was very quick in taking all off the sinking *Hatteras*. "In just nineteen minutes from the opening broadside the officers and crew of the *Hatteras*, wounded included, were on our decks, and the *Alabama* was steaming away at her best speed for

the Yucatan passage. This is probably one of the quickest naval duels on record," and also, perhaps, "the first yard-arm engagement between steamers at sea," as at times during the combat the boats were only a few yards apart, and the most of the while only a hundred yards or less.

There was no time for delay. Assistance was rapidly coming up from the other ships off Galveston, and the twinkling lights warned Semmes to glide off in the darkness. The *Alabama* was unhurt, not a shot hole to be plugged in the hull and not a rope to be spliced in order to steam away at once. She was more than a match in speed for her pursuers. They spread out like hounds hunting for the scent and beat to and fro through the night, but all they got was the sight next morning of the tops of the royal masts of the *Hatteras* just above the waters. Her courageous commander and her valiant crew were aboard the *Alabama* on the path to Jamaica. Their captors did all they could to soothe their spirits. The captain shared the comforts of Semmes' cabin, while the rank and file received all the attention it was possible to give them in the crowded quarters, which were rendered still more uncomfortable by the raging gales during most of the ten days' passage to Kingston.

The boat that had been lowered to board the *Alabama* stayed by till the *Hatteras* surrendered, and then the officer very discreetly stole away to the base at Galveston. The obloquy that so often during the Civil War followed the vanquished did not fall to the portion of the captain of the *Hatteras* at all, as he had fearlessly faced heavy odds and been beaten fairly. He was exonerated as having borne himself in "an efficient and praiseworthy manner." He took part in several brilliant engagements later and rose to the rank of commodore just before his death in 1880.



## CHAPTER XI

### SOUTHWARD TO CAPE TOWN

THE *Alabama* had had a wide sweep, and had lighted her passage with triumphant bonfires. She had met a foe in combat and beaten him, and her men had shown their spirit and worth. Thus far there had been no check, either from man or from nature. She had breasted the storms and ridden the gales victoriously ; she had sailed the highways of trade and threaded the islands of the seas, truly an empress of the waves.

Her exulting career was not due to the supineness or stupidity of her opponents. The Navy Department under Secretary Welles had been fertile in schemes and vigilant in pursuit. They soon saw that here was a far swifter and more dangerous rover than the *Sumter*. Because of the long stretch of sinuous coast line to be blockaded from Norfolk to Mexico, hundreds of boats were needed for that service and only a very few could be spared for chasing the Confederate cruisers, but ready and daring souls were deeply intent on the problem of.

strangling this serpent of speed and destructiveness. On the same day two officials in the New York Navy Yard had unfolded a scheme. They urged the fitting out of a fast side-wheel steamer armed with two hundred men and protected and disguised with bales of hay, with the purpose of running alongside the *Alabama* as a merchantman or neutral, suddenly boarding her and overcoming all resistance. It is hardly likely that such a device would have ever deceived Semmes' sharp eyes. Some better heads must have recollected also that hay burns very readily, and the project might have ended in a wholesale cremation of the fearless fellows aboard. Nothing came of the novel suggestion.<sup>1</sup>

But far more practical and far more energetic were the orders issued from Washington to some half dozen vessels to range over almost the entire Atlantic on the hunt for Semmes. The *Mohican* was directed to cruise to Cape Verde, thence on toward the Cape of Good Hope; the *San Jacinto* to Bermuda, the Windward Islands and Trinidad; the *Onward* to patrol between England and the United States; the *Sabine* to go to the Azores, Cape Verde and Brazil; the *Ino* to St. Helena; the *Kearsarge*, *Tuscarora*, and *St. Louis* around the Azores to be helpful to the

<sup>1</sup> "Naval War Records," Series I, Vol. I, p. 529.

whalers in those waters. Besides the alert consuls and commercial agents were always on the watch, sending news, sketches, and photographs from all points at which the *Alabama* touched.

But the inquisitive reporter and the ambitious editor in Washington and in the seaports were just as unwearied as ever in gathering the news and giving it to the public, and hence to Semmes, who could thus easily learn where danger lurked. He plotted the courses and marked the positions of the various pursuers, and could cut across their trails and elude their traps. But being on the rack all the while wore on his nerves. It strained even his dauntless spirit to feel that all over the face of the waters were bold, relentless hunters looking for his ship. Especially was it a tax to glide into that snare, the Gulf of Mexico, with only two outlets, one by Florida meaning almost sure ruin, the other by Yucatan that almost as surely threatened extinction if by chance a couple of vessels were guarding the channel.

He was glad to find relaxation among his English friends on the island of Jamaica. As soon as he entered the harbor of Port Royal, near Kingston, "the most cordial relations were at once established between the officers" of the three British boats

there and those of the *Alabama*. An English resident invited Semmes to spend a few days up in the mountains. After landing his prisoners, he turned over affairs to his efficient First Officer Kell, while he went up into the heights to enjoy the untrammelled hospitality of an English admirer. Semmes had not had a holiday since leaving England to command the *Alabama* some five months before. He had been cramped in his cabin, had breathed only the salt air, had cast his eyes seaward on the same wide waste of waters. It was monotonous in spite of the changeful moods of the ocean.

He wanted the steadiness of the land, the green vegetation, the hills firm and unyielding in their verdure. His pen registered his throbbing delight in the pictures of the tropical luxuriance and lushness. He writes :

“For the first ten miles, we rode over a beautiful macadamized road, or rather avenue, lined with the gigantic cactus, growing frequently to the height of twenty and thirty feet, and several specimens of the palm ; chief among which was the cocoanut tree, shooting its trunk with the straightness of an arrow to a great height, and waving gracefully in the breeze its superb, feather-like foliage. The way was lined with many picturesque country houses, each surrounded by its extensive and well-kept grounds, on which were growing crops, chiefly of fruits and vegetables, but inter-

spersed occasionally with a field of Indian corn or sugar-cane. Hedgerows and shade trees adorned the front yards. . . . We occasionally obtained glimpses of beautiful valleys . . . in which fairy cottages were nestled. The scenery was continually changing, now skirting the base of abrupt hills, now running over a stream, and now plunging into the recesses of a wood, with the trees arching overhead, like the groined work of a cathedral.

“At the end of our ten miles of carriage-drive, we found ourselves at the foot of the mountains . . . and after some refreshment mounted saddle-horses which we found in waiting. As we ascended the slopes of the mountains, we changed rapidly the character of the vegetation, every hundred feet bringing us in the presence of new forest trees and new plants, until we dismounted on the lawn of my friend, the immediate surroundings of which were all English, the cedar and other well-known trees and shrubs of the temperate latitudes supplanting the tropical vegetation we had left. The air was so delightfully changed from the sultry heats of the coast that we found a fire quite pleasant as the night set in.

“How magical the change was to the ample halls and elegant leisure of an English home, perched on the mountainside and overlooking a perfect wilderness of tropical vegetation! . . . How soundly I slept . . . fanned by the gentlest of sea breezes . . . and lullabied by the distant breaker! I was awakened the next morning by the merry songs of a hundred birds, that came appropriately blended with the perfume of the flowers that clustered around my windows; and I have seldom looked upon a more beautiful picture than when I threw back the blinds and caught a view of the

landscape, rejoicing in the morning's sun, with all its wealth of tropical fruits and flowers, and the sea—the glorious sea—glittering like a mirror in the distance. Nothing can be more charming than the interior of an English household when the ice has been broken. The successful entertainment of a guest is one of those artless arts of which the English gentleman above all others is master; and the art consists in putting the guest so entirely at his ease as to make him feel at home in the first half hour.

“We made several agreeable visits to neighboring plantations. I was in an entirely new world—those mountains of Jamaica—and was charmed with everything I saw. All was nature; and nature presented herself in her most lovely aspect, whether we viewed the sky overhead, the sea at our feet, or the broken and picturesque country around us. Time flew rapidly, and what with delightful rides and lunches and evening parties, where music and the bright eyes of fair women beguiled the senses, I should have been in danger of forgetting the war and the *Alabama*, if Kell had not sent me a courier on the third or fourth day informing me that he was nearly ready for sea. I descended at once from the empyrean in which I had been wandering . . . and rode back to the coast.

“Upon my arrival in town I found that my friends had kindly put a notice in the papers informing the good people that I would be at the Exchange at twelve, etc. Was obliged to go, and made a speech to the people, which was well received.”<sup>1</sup>

But there was other work of a much more disagreeable kind, which Semmes did not in the least

<sup>1</sup> “Naval War Records,” Series I, Vol. II, p. 724.

shirk. His paymaster had got drunk, and was "hail fellow well met" on shore with all the sailors he saw. Kell had arrested him, and held him for Semmes to deal with. Of course the case was settled almost in a moment. In half an hour the man was landed bag and baggage. He deserted to the other side, and went to England, and was always ready to swear to evidence against the Confederate cause. He was the only instance among the officers on either of Semmes' boats of disloyalty to his chief.

The sailors also had been carousing and rioting on shore, in defiance of the police. Many had been dragged on board, ironed, and passed below. Two others, not liking the prospect, seized a dugout alongside, took the paddles from the negroes and began to make for the shore. Instantly a boat was sent after the fugitives. As the pursuers came near, the two sailors pitched one of the negroes overboard, and the chase was of course delayed to haul him in so as to save him from the sharks, always prowling in this bay. The same trick was resorted to by the sailors when they seemed again about to be overtaken, but at last they were overhauled, and were put in irons on being returned to the *Alabama*.

Semmes' courtmartialed the offenders after the

*Alabama* was out on the high seas again. They were penitent in answers and profuse in promises. Even the two runaways who had had such a thrilling race protested that they had meant only a frolic on shore to bid the girls "good-bye." All the culprits made out a fair defense for themselves and were soon set at liberty to go about their appointed tasks. Thus again had Semmes proved the qualities of firmness and quickness tempered with judgment.

The whole force was needed as active days were immediately at hand. Two prizes were soon in the hands of Semmes, the *Golden Rule*, and the *Chateleine*. The islanders of St. Domingo and Jamaica witnessed a bonfire of the two sail. The prisoners were put ashore at St. Domingo, where the *Alabama* anchored for a few hours in one of the most historic spots of the New World, since it was for years the chief seat of the Spanish empire in the western hemisphere. Here Columbus, Cortez, and other Spanish explorers and adventurers had lived at times. The events of this romantic era passed through Semmes' mind; he called up the stirring scenes of that by-gone time as he strolled through the town, loitered in the decaying palace and mused in the ruined cathedral.



But he dared not tarry ; there were always keen hounds at his heels, and there was prey for him to seek and fall upon. The first capture after quitting this ancient port was the *Palmetto*, which was soon lighting the waves, as the *Alabama* went on with her quest. She next ran down the *Olive Jane* and the *Golden Eagle*. The former was filled with choice wine and delicacies from Bordeaux, but Semmes dared not put the cargo at the disposal of his crew, as every one would have soon been drunk. The fire consumed it all. It was pathetic to Semmes to destroy the *Golden Eagle*, as she was near the end of a long voyage from San Francisco to Cork. "This ship had buffeted the gales of the frozen latitudes of Cape Horn, threaded her pathway among its icebergs, been parched with the heats of the tropics, and drenched with the rains of the equator, to fall into the hands of her enemy, only a few hundred miles from her port." She was freighted with guano of the best quality, which would have enriched the fields and magnified the yield several fold, but she was sacrificed to the god of the flames. The prisoners were placed on the *Washington* the next to the last day of February, as she, though American, had neutral goods aboard, and hence was forwarded under bond.

Two days after the *John A. Parks*, with her white pine lumber, delighted Semmes' carpenter, as he was sorely in want of such supplies. She was documented correctly, but unfortunately for her a letter in her bag gave away the deception as the dealer chartering the boat in New York wrote that he was going to have the cargo "certified to by the British consul as the property of British subjects." She went up in smoke like so many of her sisters. Her unlucky crew saw two ships bonded, the *Bethiah Thayer* and the *Punjaub*, on the last of which they were placed.

Semmes still headed south and came near crossing the equator with the sun as he was less than three degrees north on March 21st. Some forty-eight hours later the *Morning Star* and the *Kingfisher* became his victims. The former sailed on under bond. The *Kingfisher* was a whaler, and the oil in her hold made the flames bravely defiant of the torrents of rain that seemed to battle for her against the raging fire. With the thunder rumbling, and the black clouds overhead, the *Alabama* was uniquely celebrating her course in tropic waters. Before the close of March, she had two more bonfires to her credit, though not with such dramatic effects—the *Charles Hill* and the *Nora*. Both had made pitifully

awkward attempts to document their cargoes as neutral, but the trick was too transparent.

On the third of April, five days after crossing the line, Semmes made a most valuable capture, the *Louisa Hatch* with her thousand tons of the best Welsh coal, bound for Ceylon. The *Alabama* was running short of fuel, and was headed for her trysting place, Fernando de Noronha, to meet the *Agrippina*. Semmes knew it was a violation of the neutral stand of Brazil to take his prize into the port of this volcanic island, off Cape St. Roque, but he dared attempt it as it was out of the question to transfer the coal on the high seas.

It was a penal station for Brazil. "It is too insignificant for traffic, and has no good harbor where a ship could repair damages or refit." Semmes' arrival was announced, and he began to coal from the *Louisa Hatch*. When the governor's messengers came aboard, there was a popping of champagne corks and a clinking of glasses, but no objection was made to the nearness of the prizes, and Semmes continued to take on fuel.

The next morning he went ashore to pay his respects to the governor. He rode the governor's horses up to the mansion and sat at table with that dignity, whose skin was about the color "of tanned

sole leather," while his wife "was a very sprightly and not uncomely mulatto," and the two children whom Semmes praised and patted on the head had "rather kinky, or perhaps I should say curly, hair." Though he was battling for the South in the interest of slavery, and though he always refused to treat negro captives as prisoners, it was far from any wish of Semmes to call up the race issue now, as he "was a man of the world and was not at all dismayed" at the discovery that he was in the midst of a family of inferior blood. He drank the wine, smoked the cigars, and chatted at full ease with the other guests at the levee; then went on horseback across the island, stopped at a country house, where he ate grapes, figs, melons and the delicious "green cocoanut."

He returned that afternoon to his berth, and the next morning came a fat turkey and a beautiful bouquet from the governor's wife, who, Semmes very astutely thought, remembered the gentle patting of her children's curly heads. It was plain sailing henceforth. "My diplomacy from this time onward was all right. I did not hear a word from the governor or any one in authority about neutral rights or the violation of neutral jurisdictions. Brazil had, I knew, followed the lead of the Euro-

pean powers in excluding prizes from her ports, and I had fully expected to receive some remonstrance against my bringing in the *Louisa Hatch*, but madame was too strong for the governor.”

His conquests were not yet over. He had not in the least counted on any prize in this unfrequented place, but just as he got on his last boatload of coal “the ubiquitous Yankee” turned up, two of them at the same time, whalers. They heaved to outside, and the two masters pulled in to do some bartering. They went to the *Louisa Hatch* and very amicably struck up a conversation with the prize master, who, being English, tried to play American as thoroughly as he could. He lied smoothly and pleasantly, saying that his boat had sprung a leak and that the other one was a Brazilian packet. Not being in uniform on account of warmth and rain, he was getting on finely when a Confederate flag was accidentally exposed. Orders were bawled out and both began to pull back to their own quarters. But the *Alabama* was now ready, and she passed out to take a look. There was nothing doubtful about the nationality, and the *Lafayette* and the *Kate Cory* increased the *Alabama’s* list by two names. Both, with the *Hatch*, were

burnt, the prisoners from all three vessels being sent to Pernambuco on a Brazilian vessel.

Semmes could now carry out the cherished object of cruising off the coast of Brazil, as his bunkers were full, his crew in fine shape, and his ship in the best order. He had made the effort with the *Sumter* but had been forced to give it up. He passed out of the tropical rain belt, and in less than twenty-four hours after his departure, the whaler, *Nye*, with over four hundred barrels of oil, on her homeward stretch after nearly three years' absence, dropped into his hands. It seemed such a bitter disappointment after so many months of exposure to all the fierceness of the seas, but she was well soaked in oil and made a magnificent blaze. The *Dorcas Prince*, with coal for the far China coast, shared the same fate. A day or so later, on May 3d, there were two more victims, the *Sea Lark* and the *Union Jack*; they were trapped in two hours. These four crews crowded the *Alabama*, the more because several women and children were included among them.

Semmes ran into Bahia, the second port of the Brazilian empire. No sooner was he at anchor than, thanks to the activity of a United States consul, he was served with a proclamation of the President of

the Province of Pernambuco, charging him with sundry violations of neutrality and ordering him to depart from Fernando de Noronha within twenty-four hours, where it was supposed that he still was. Semmes' answer is not extant, but it was scarcely couched in gentle terms. Whatever it was, it was "perfectly satisfactory," though the governor kept asking him to get away. Another Confederate ship, the *Georgia*, came in to load up from a consort ordered there, the *Castor*, which, being a neutral, had the right to land her coal, and then the *Georgia* and the *Alabama* had the right to take it on board. It was a delicate question of neutrality that Semmes raised when he wanted to coal direct from the consort, but finally it was brought off to him in lighters. With these two Confederate boats in Bahia, and the *Florida* at Pernambuco, within wiring communication, the South had a squadron in foreign waters, perhaps for the only time during the entire four years of war.

But the *Alabama* went her way alone, and soon had at her belt two more trophies, the *Gildersleeve*, which was burnt, and the *Justina*, which was sent on under bond, with the prisoners. Now the *Alabama's* powers were severely tested. She espied a competitor in speed and about nine in the evening

set off after her. She put on all sail, had her best steersman at the wheel, and all night she strained in the chase with Semmes on deck. At half-past seven the next morning, after a race of eleven hours, she won, and found her prey was a Dutchman. Semmes admits that he was a little sour at his breakfast, and perhaps excusably so, as his steed had never been so nearly distanced.

His humor was softened in the coming few days, when the *Jabez Snow* and the *Amazonian*, both bound for Montevideo, the first with coal, the other with assorted freight, were taken. Both went up in smoke. An Englishman took off the captives in return for some provisions and a valuable chronometer.

With the taking of the *Talisman*, on which Semmes noted four twelve-pounders, he determined to commission a ship himself, as he could spare some officers and a dozen seamen, and arm her with a couple of the *Talisman's* pieces. He did not have to wait long after burning the *Talisman*. The *Conrad* soon fell into his grip. Being "a tidy little bark of about three hundred and fifty tons, with good sailing qualities, I resolved to commission her as a cruiser. . . . Never perhaps was a ship of war fitted out so promptly before. The *Conrad* was a



commissioned ship, with armament, crew, and provisions on board, flying her pennant and with sailing orders, signed, sealed, and delivered, before sunset on the day of her capture." Being a child of the *Alabama*, it was meet that she should be christened the *Tuscaloosa*, after the town of that name in the state of Alabama. She went through the ceremony far out on the ocean, but the legitimacy of her birth was undoubted. Semmes placed her former crew on an English boat, and the three vessels went their several ways.

Semmes turned to the South and soon came to the forks of the road, one way leading to Cape Horn, and the other, which Semmes took, to the Cape of Good Hope. But before going far, he found that his bread was infested with weevils. He must go back to Rio de Janeiro unless he could capture a craft with a supply aboard. Luck saved him that long trip of some eight hundred miles to the baker's shop, as the *Anna F. Schmidt* crossed his path on her journey from Boston to California. She had heels also, and gave the *Alabama* another all night chase, but it was worth the pursuit as she not only had bread "put up in the nicest kind of air-tight casks," but also a quantity of "ready-made clothing, hats, boots, and shoes." It must have been hard to put

the torch to such a generous mother after spending almost a day in "robbing" her.

After two more exciting experiences Semmes dropped anchor in Saldanha Bay, on the coast of Africa, not far from Cape Town. But before setting foot on this continent for the first time in his life, he had a long race, nearly all night, after a boat that answered his shot with another, and thus set his whole force on edge, as they felt sure of a fight with the enemy. She looked almost mountain high as the *Alabama* neared her, and five guns could be made out through her port-holes. When Kell in thundering tones demanded, "What ship is that?" there floated back the quiet answer: "This is her Britannic Majesty's ship *Diomedé*." A few remarks passed and each went on.

Shortly after, the god of the waves smiled on Semmes as the *Express* came into his keeping. Her guano, though really the property of the Peruvian government, was not properly attested and Semmes treated a sovereign power just as he would have treated an individual. There was not the proper legal evidence that it was neutral, and hence boat and all received the torch.

Then the *Alabama* glided into the land-locked harbor of Saldanha Bay, with an anchorage spacious

enough to accommodate a large fleet. Semmes wanted to overhaul his vessel, recaulk inside and out, and repaint. He had also to learn what danger there might be at Cape Town as the fame of the "British pirate" had spread to these distant lands, and one or two United States cruisers might be lying in wait thereabouts for him. The Boers were not inquisitive on neutrality questions, perhaps did not know there was such a matter, while their English overlords were more than content to let it all alone unless prodded by some busy, or aggrieved person. Nevertheless the South Africans were very curious about this strange visitor. They flocked in from their farms, with presents of game, milk, skins, and horns, went over the boat with the fresh eagerness of children, wondered at the hugeness of the guns, tested their muscle in handling the hundred pound shot, and invited all to go ashore, hunt, eat, and partake of their hospitality generally. As many as could get relief from the work on the ship fished, shot water fowl, or enjoyed other diversions, but none returned with big game.

One of these joyous excursions brought the only death that occurred among the *Alabama's* crew during her career down to the engagement at Cherbourg. A young engineer officer, in pulling his fowling

piece toward himself, discharged the load into his heart. Naturally the accident carried gloom to all the little band, and with impressive ceremony he was left to rest in the graveyard of a benevolent Dutch farmer, under a marble slab.

Having satisfied himself that no adversary was waiting for him at Cape Town and having been assured of English friendliness there, Semmes drew out of his snug retreat and sailed for the objective, some sixty miles away. On the trip he spoke his bantling, the *Tuscaloosa*, which had not yet accomplished anything of moment. Semmes continued toward Cape Town, and in sight of the point he scooped in the *Sea Bride*, from New York, with goods for trading along the African coast. It was a grand spectacle, and a gala day for all the inhabitants who could scramble to any place of vantage for viewing it.

A daily paper, the *Argus*, gave a lively, efflorescent description of the occasion :

“ Here was to be a capture by the celebrated Confederate craft, close to the entrance of Table Bay. The inhabitants rushed off to get a sight. Crowds of people ran up the Lion’s hill, and to the Kloof road. All the cabs were chartered—every one of them ; . . . no questions asked, but orders were given to drive as hard as possible. . . . As we reached

the corner, there lay the *Alabama* within fifty yards of the unfortunate Yankee. . . . The Yankee was evidently taken by surprise. . . . Like a cat watching and playing with a victimized mouse, Captain Semmes permitted his prize to draw off a few yards, and then he got up steam again, and pounced down upon her. She first sailed round the Yankee from stem to stern, and from stern to stem again. The way that fine, saucy, rakish craft was handled was worth going a hundred miles to see. . . . She sent a boat with a prize crew off, took possession . . . and sent the bark off to sea.

“The *Alabama* then made for the port. We came round to visit Captain Semmes on board. . . . We found the heights . . . covered with people; the road . . . lined with cabs. . . . The windows were all thrown up and ladies waved their handkerchiefs, . . . all joined in the general enthusiasm. . . . There were masses of people, nothing but a sea of heads as far as the eye could reach. . . . The roofs of all the houses from which Table Bay is overlooked were made available as standing places for the people. . . . The jetties were all crowded; . . . it was almost impossible to . . . get a boat. However . . . we did get a boat, and went off, in the midst of dingies, cargo-boats, gigs, and wherries, all as full as they could hold. Nearly all the city was upon the bay. . . . On getting alongside the *Alabama*, we found about a dozen boats before us, and we had not been on board five minutes before she was surrounded by nearly every boat in Table Bay, and as boat after boat arrived, three hearty cheers were given for Captain Semmes and his gallant privateer. This, upon the part of a

neutral people, is perchance wrong ; but we are not arguing a case—we are recording facts. They did cheer, and cheer with a will too. It was not perhaps taking the view of either side, Federal or Confederate, but in admiration of the skill, pluck, and daring of the *Alabama*, her captain and her crew, who afford a general theme of admiration the world over.

“Visitors were received by the officers of the ship most courteously and without distinction, and the officers conversed freely and unreservedly of their exploits. There was nothing like brag in their manner of answering questions put to them. They are as fine and gentlemanly a set of fellows as ever we saw. . . . She had a very large crew, fine, lithe-looking fellows, the very picture of English man-of-war’s men.”

Semmes says that this picture of the interest aroused by the *Alabama* was not overdrawn, as the deck was so crowded that one could hardly stir, and that, too, not with the merely curious and idle, but with “the better classes, gentlemen and ladies of distinction.” He was especially gratified at the endorsement of the ladies, since, he declares, “I have always found the instincts of women to be right.” And he was delighted with their spontaneous sympathy. Of course the officers were all hospitably entertained and the crew’s temper for service was little improved by the incense offered to their valor and fame.

The international aspect of the capture off the harbor that all the town had rushed to see led to a legal contention. The alert consul claimed that it was done in English waters, and he bolstered up his case with affidavits, but the decision went to Semmes, who was always scrupulous about the marine league. Both principle and policy favored the utmost care, as it would be short-sighted to fly in the face of such good friends as the English. He was soon tested again. On his way to Simon's Town he overhauled the *Martha Wenzel* within the mouth of False Bay. Semmes dumbfounded the captain by "releasing instead of burning his ship," though he might have strained the evidence, and have held the boat for an indefinite time while the case was befogged with technicalities and delayed by red tape to a tiresome degree.

He did not stay here longer than necessary to coal. Having ordered the *Tuscaloosa* and the *Sea Bride* to go to Angra Pequena on the west coast of Africa, he pulled out into the great roadway around South Africa, keeping a lookout for his prey, but without any catches. He then beat his way up to the rendezvous, sold the *Sea Bride* to an Englishman for English sovereigns, consigned the wool on the *Tuscaloosa* to dealers for sale, two-thirds of the

proceeds to be credited to the Confederacy in some English bank. All these transactions in a port of savage Hottentots, where there were no hints of civilized jurisdiction, bordered closely on the exploits of pirates of several centuries before, but of course the aims were all different no matter how close the resemblance in the steps taken to gain them. As the money was counted, the rich clink of gold could be heard by the sailors as they passed conveniently near, but so well were they disciplined that there was not a murmur of discontent among them or a scowl of envy. In these acts, "somewhat suggesting the pranks of the buccaneers, our crew were as well held in hand as though serving on an English man-of-war in times of profound peace, and at the same time in a state of perfect contentment." <sup>1</sup>

The trio parted. What diplomatic snarls might have been heard over this transfer of a ship in the twilight of law and order cannot be known, but all trouble was forestalled by the loss of the *Sea Bride* on the African coast shortly after.<sup>2</sup> Semmes himself sailed away to haunt the roadstead off the Cape, but all to no purpose in spite of his watchfulness.

<sup>1</sup> Sinclair, "Two Years on the *Alabama*," p. 158.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 159.



Not caring to put into Cape Town without having had any fortune, about the middle of September he ran into Simon's Town again, preparatory to his incursion into far eastern waters.

While on sentry duty outside one night, a mighty ship flew past, which might have been the *Vanderbilt*. Since leaving the island of Jamaica, amid all her wanderings southward, zigzagging across the Atlantic, the *Alabama* had sighted no war vessel of her enemy, though the faithful hounds of the hunt had unflinchingly followed her "cold trail." A fox-sleuth was the *Vanderbilt*, presented to the United States government by, and named in honor of, one of the first multi-millionaires of the new world. Like a shuttlecock, she had been steaming between Cape Town and Simon's Town, and one day the two boats were almost in sight of each other's smoke. She won the admiration of the *Alabama's* staff. Sinclair considered that her captain, Baldwin, had used the best judgment. He had followed his prey from the West Indies to the Brazil thoroughfare, and thence to the Cape without loss of the scent at any time. But it took eighty tons of coal a day to heat her boilers, and in consequence she had to retrace her steps and lose time. Except for such a contingency she might have been stationed

in the Strait of Sunda, to grapple with the *Alabama* there, and the famous conflict might have been viewed by naked East Indian islanders instead of the polite natives of France.

These lurking dangers from man and the ever-present perils of the sea would wear on nerves of steel. The *Alabama* was unscathed, the plaudits of the English swelled around her, the eyes of the world were turned toward her, but her resolute, self-contained commander was growing weary from the strain of his anxious service. No man heard it from his lips, no shade of it flitted over his face, but it trickled from his pen on the pages of his diary, that solace of the solitary soul shut off from fellow creatures, yearning to commune with some one.

Perhaps his spirits were sinking with the waning of Confederate hopes, or melancholy was creeping on him with his increasing distance from home, as he approached the antipodal point in the Southern hemisphere from his own hearth and fireside. At any rate, from some or all these influences, the note of depression began to sound in his confidential utterances.

Down in the wintry air of the Southern hemisphere, he felt the change: "I am quite knocked up with cold and fever, but sick as I may be, I can

never lie by, and be quiet, the demands of duty being inexorable and incessant."

The physical despondency grew on him, and some two weeks later he wrote: "Ship rolling and pitching in the sea and all things dreary looking and uncomfortable. I am supremely disgusted with the sea and all its belongings. The fact is I am past the age when men ought to be subjected to all the hardships and discomforts of the sea. Seagoing is one of those constant strifes which none but the vigorous, the hardy, and the hopeful—in short, the youthful, or at most the middle-aged—should be engaged in. The very roar of the wind through the rigging with its accompaniment of rolling and trembling, hard, overcast skies, etc., gives me the blues."

Several days afterward, he imparted to the silent receptacle of his thoughts and feelings one Sunday when the regular muster was over: "How tiresome is the routine of cruising becoming. An ugly, short, chopping sea got up during the night into which the ship plunged and rolled so as to awaken me every now and then."<sup>1</sup>

Amid these physical distresses and mental discordances, about the middle of October, he calcu-

<sup>1</sup> "Naval War Records," Series I, Vol. II, pp. 762-5.

lated that he was almost diametrically opposite the dearest spot on earth to him : "I am to-day about antipodal with my home in Alabama." But he drew one consolation from his position : "Well, there is one comfort, I cannot very well get any farther away from home. Every day's run from this point, whether east or west, must carry me nearer to it." But neither the weaknesses of the flesh nor the anguish of the heart could obscure his insight or slacken his energy.

## CHAPTER XII

### IN EASTERN WATERS

SEMMES had hunted over the marine roads of the Atlantic, passing from winter in the north to winter in the south, with all the attendant afflictions of these extremes. With the few other Confederate cruisers, he had practically swept the flag of the United States from the commercial highways of that greatest area of water transportation in the world. If he was to beat up more game, he must hunt in other fields. Under directions from Secretary Mallory, he was now to cross the Indian Ocean.

But he must first replenish his crew, which had been reduced by the dissipations and debaucheries of Cape Town, and seduced by the purse and the promises of the wily and indomitable American consul there. Though Semmes applied to the police and they were willing to do all they could, there were the barriers of extra-territoriality around the consul. In some cases, the sailors found refuge within the consular grounds, or at least claimed protection.

Semmes, however, was not the man to be balked by any but impassable obstacles. He was also a master of the nicest strategy and the most delicate diplomacy. He might violate the spirit of neutrality, but he must not ruffle the form in the slightest. The fourteen men lost by desertion must be replaced in a manner consonant with the respect due her Majesty, whose subjects in South Africa had been so cordial to the *Alabama*.

He reasoned out the case very logically: "I said to myself, my sailors have gone on shore in her Majesty's dominions and refuse to come back to me. When I apply to her Majesty's police, they tell me that so sacred is the soil of England, no man must be coerced to do what he doesn't want to do. Good! I reply, a ship of war is a part of the territory to which she belongs, and that if some of the subjects of the Queen should think proper to come into my territory, and refuse to go back, I may surely apply the same principle and refuse to compel them."

At this juncture a landlord came along to say that he had eleven boarders ready to volunteer. Semmes turned to him and quietly said, "And so you have some gentlemen boarding at your house who desire to take passage with me?" It is thus

that he tells of the incident : “The landlord smiled and nodded assent. I continued, ‘You know I cannot ship seamen in her Majesty’s ports, but I see no reason why I should not take passengers to sea with me if they desire to go.’ ‘Certainly, your honor—they can work their passage, you know.’ ‘I suppose you will charge something for bringing these gentlemen on board?’ ‘Somewhat, your honor.’ Here the landlord pulled out a memorandum and began to read. ‘Bill Bunting, board and lodging, ten shillings—drinks, one pound ten. Tom Bowline, board and lodging, six shillings—Tom only landed yesterday from a Dutch ship—drinks, twelve shillings.’ ‘Hold,’ said I, ‘never mind the board and lodging and drinks—go to the paymaster’—and turning to Kell, I told him to give the paymaster the necessary instructions,—‘and he will pay you your fares for bringing the passengers on board.’ The ‘passengers’ were already alongside, and, being sent down to the surgeon, were examined, and passed as sound and able-bodied men.”

It was nine at night before all was ready, and, though a stiff gale was blowing, Semmes got off ; he was afraid the *Vanderbilt*, which was faster than the *Alabama* and threw twice as much metal, might come up and blockade him. He headed his boat,

under steam, against wind and wave. "This struggle of the little ship with the elements was a thing to be remembered. The moon . . . was near her full, shedding a flood of light upon the scene. The bay was whitened with foam, as the waters were lashed into fury by the storm. Around the curve of the 'horseshoe' arose broken, bald, rocky mountains, on the crests of which were piled fleecy white clouds, blinking in the moonlight like banks of snow. It appeared as if the Devil . . . had touched the mountains with the stillness of death, and wreathed them with winding sheets. The scene was wild and weird beyond description. It was a picture for the eye of poet or painter to dwell upon. Nor was the imagination less touched, when from time to time the revolving light upon the grim old Cape—that Cape which had so long divided the Eastern from the Western world—threw its full blaze upon the deck of the struggling ship. Overhead the sky was perfectly clear, there being not so much as a speck of cloud to be seen—and this in the midst of a howling gale of wind. At three A. M. we cleared the Cape, and, keeping the ship off a few points, gave her the trysails with the bonnets off. She bounded over the seas like a stag hound unleashed. I had been up all night,



and now went below to snatch some brief repose before the toils of another day should begin."

Thus he set off. Six months would elapse before he should see the stormy Cape of Good Hope again. He made south at once for the fortieth parallel to follow that for his easting, so as to get the push from the "brave west winds" that blow so steadily all the year round in the Indian Ocean, since they are not interrupted by any large bodies of land. They are also more unfavorably known as "the roaring forties," and Semmes found them deserving of their evil name.

He passed in sight of two lonely islets, St. Peter and St. Paul, in the faint hope of sighting some whalers there, as that was a sort of rendezvous for them; but no sail rewarded his search. The gales, unimpeded by any headlands of size, piled up enormous rollers that came towering over Semmes' ship. After passing these specks of rock, he ran into another gale. "The scene was a sublime one to look upon. The seas—those long swells before described—were literally running mountains high, the wind was howling with more than usual fury, and a dense snow-storm was pelting us from the blackest and most angry looking of clouds." This storm subsided only to be succeeded by another one

in which the ship lay for ten hours. One of the crew graphically wrote of some of these storms : " We were actually running in a deep valley between hills of dark green water, and striking a huge cross wave that would bury our bows, bringing the vessel to with a shock that made her vibrate in every timber." <sup>1</sup> So gallant and staunch was the ship, however, that, in spite of " every variety of bad weather," she made some 4,400 miles in twenty-four days, about 178 miles daily.

Semmes turned northward and soon the atmosphere became softer and gentler. The men aired their bedding and mended their garments. Word was spread around that the United States gunboat *Wyoming* was waiting for them. Things were put to rights and drilling went forward almost daily. " The ship is soon sparkling as a diamond, in fresh paint and polished brasswork, and is verily a nautical school. . . . The various warlike exercises are going on for hours together. . . . It is an active and at times stirring and exciting drill, particularly in the boarding rushes where examples of wonderful activity and quickness may be observed ; for Jack takes real interest in his exercises and studies, if we except the handling of small fire-

<sup>1</sup> " The Cruise of the *Alabama*," p. 99.

arms. . . . He has a thorough contempt for this sort of weapon ; . . . he will slight and avoid it as far as he dares to the bitter end. . . . Later on the news that the *Wyoming* is holding the passage of the strait emphasizes the excitement, and the crew feel that something more than playing fighting may take place in a few hours.”<sup>1</sup>

In the latter part of October, an English ship gave the definite information that the *Wyoming* was cruising in the Strait of Sunda, but anchoring every night under the island of Krakatoa, which just a score of years later blew up, causing nearly forty thousand souls to perish, the most awful natural catastrophe that history records. As Semmes drew near this narrow passage, numerous sail were seen, but all neutral except one, the *Amanda*, the first catch on this trip. Her hemp and sugar were not protected, as the awkward certificates that claimed the property for British subjects had not been sworn to, and hence all, with the ship, went to the torch, throwing “a grim and ominous glare to the very mouth of the strait.”

Even this conflagration at night did not draw the *Wyoming*. After resting in the narrow channel one evening, Semmes passed on, and at the other en-

<sup>1</sup>Sinclair, “Two Years on the *Alabama*,” p. 168. .

trance bagged the *Winged Racer*, "a perfect beauty—one of those New York ships of superb model, with taut, graceful masts, and square yards, known as clippers," with a cargo chiefly of sugar, hides and jute, and some provisions. These last the *Alabama* took in large part, but allowed the two captured crews at their request to supply themselves with all that the rowboats could carry to Batavia. Thus "robbed," the ship made a bonfire in the darkness, and the historic Strait of Sunda was lighted up at both ends. All merchant craft had now such clear warning that Semmes felt it was useless to hover here longer, and he shot out into the China Sea.

Now came a severe test for the *Alabama*, and she showed her age, and the effects of the straining and racking she had undergone in her arduous days since leaving Liverpool. A fine clipper ship, the *Contest*, was sighted. Four miles away, she was ordered to heave to, but instead of "obeying our command, the gallant ship kept off a point or two, probably her best point of sailing—gave herself top-gallant and topmast studdingsails and away she went.

"The breeze was tolerably fresh but not stiff. . . . The chase was evidently gaining on us. It was some fifteen or twenty minutes before the engineer had a head of steam on. We now gave the

ship all steam, and trimmed the sails to the best possible advantage. Still the fugitive ship retained her distance from us, if she did not increase it. It was the first time the *Alabama* had appeared dull. She was under both sail and steam, and yet here was a ship threatening to run away from her. She must surely be out of trim. I tried therefore the effect of getting my crew aft on the quarter-deck, and shifting aft some of the forward guns. This helped us visibly, and the ship sprang forward with increased speed. We were now at least holding our own, but it was impossible to say as yet whether we were gaining an inch. If the breeze had freshened, the chase would have run away from us beyond all question. I watched the signs of the weather anxiously. It was between nine and ten o'clock A. M. Fortunately as the sun gained power and drove away the mists of the morning, the breeze began to decline. Now came the triumph of steam. When we had come within long range, I threw the spray over the quarter-deck of the chase with a rifle shot from my bow chaser. Still she kept on, and it was not until all hope was evidently lost that the proud clipper ship, which had been beaten rather by the failure of the wind than the speed of the *Alabama*, shortened sail and hove to."

Semmes cordially congratulated the captain on his skilful handling of his ship, and expressed his regret that he must burn her and her cargo of Japanese goods. He stretched on northward through the Karimata Strait, and lay to at Souriton Island while he sent out his launch to cruise around for merchantmen. Though he got no reward for this effort, he overhauled a larger number of ships, and got one of them, an Englishman, to take his prisoners to Batavia.

Beating among the myriad islands of the East Indian archipelago, he crossed and skirted the west coast of Borneo for many miles, and then went over the China Sea to Cochin China, and to Pulo Condore, a coral island, opposite the mouths of the Mekong River. Expecting to find it uninhabited except by Malays, he counted on making it temporary Confederate soil as he had done with Angra Pequena, on the west coast of Africa ; but to his astonishment he saw the French flag in the harbor, and met the French governor in control, that nation having taken possession two years before. He was a most courteous, generous fellow, and received the *Alabama* with due honor, made presents of food to the crew, and gave the whole force the run of the land. Being hardly more than a beardless youth, he

had very likely never heard of those thorny thickets of belligerent rights and neutral limitations. At least he asked no embarrassing questions and threw out no meddlesome hints as to Semmes' length of stay. Untrammelled in movement, undisturbed by points of international etiquette, the crew when off duty disported themselves at will,—swimming, fishing, hunting, exploring every cranny of the island, studying the antics of the monkeys, bagging huge vampires, killing snakes, getting fresh meat, fruits and vegetables. One of the sailors, of whom we shall hear in noble rôles later, was an adept in a peculiar exercise with the serpents. It was his pride to catch a dangerous reptile by the tail, and while swinging him out at full length, give a sudden snap as one does in cracking a whip, and break the creature's neck.

But there were no dance-halls and no rum shops ashore here, so Jack had full leave when not at work ; and there was no insubordination. It was a fortnight of rest and ease and healthy relaxation ; it was a better, stronger crew at the end.

In the meantime very serious and difficult work had been done on the ship to improve her speed. Some of the copper had fallen off below the water line. There was enough mechanical ability aboard

to construct a sort of coffer to fit along the hull so closely that the water could be pumped out, leaving a dry box for the men to work in to replace the sheets, and make other repairs.

After these two weeks of wholesome enjoyment and pleasure, the boat set out for Singapore. Here Semmes unlocked the mystery of the disappearance of the American flag from these far eastern routes. He saw twenty-two ships tied up in the harbor, and he learned of some eight or ten others at different ports on the eastern coast of Asia. The rays from the two bonfires in the Strait of Sunda had frightened the fleet so badly that all were idly moored in some haven. They would certainly not leave these secure retreats so long as there was danger. The *Alabama* could not seize them, but once she was away, they might creep out and make a dash for home, and she might be able to pounce down on some of them.

Her sending the American coveys scurrying to cover had unintentionally inconvenienced her best friends in some amusing ways. An English official relates a humorous instance of the complaint made in a social club whose members otherwise-sympathized strongly with the South: "One hot season when Madras lay gasping for breath, there were no



cooling drinks to be had—the ice ship from Boston to Madras had not arrived. The *Alabama* was known to be out, and to her account the fact of the ice ship's being missing was at once laid. The Southern cause had many supporters among us at the time but . . . had not our mess rights . . . been violated? So, for a time at least, there was pause in debate among us, until one day the ice ship was seen in the offing, and the Federal cause went down again to zero like the temperature in our tumblers.”<sup>1</sup>

In Singapore, the meeting center for all Asiatic peoples, Semmes could gather up all the threads of rumors about his career and his purposes, but he stayed only long enough to see the uselessness of remaining in the East. So he repaired his boat, took on coal, and, so far as the exigencies of the situation permitted, accepted the English hospitalities which were profusely offered. The recreations and amusements of the land seduced some half dozen of Semmes' fellows to desert, while many of the rest were bodily dragged aboard by searching parties from the vessel.

Semmes' retirement from Eastern waters was all the more to be recommended in view of the fact that

<sup>1</sup> Sir William Butler's "Autobiography," pp. 42-43.

his ship's strength and usefulness were much impaired. The copper on the bottom, which could not be reached unless in dry dock, was falling off in sheets. The constant fires in the furnace prevented cleaning, so that the boilers were dangerously weak. As there were no facilities in that distant quarter for putting her in trim again, he determined to cross to the shores of India, coast along the peninsula around to the western side, thence sailing for the east line of Africa, and on southward to Cape Town once more.

Semmes hauled out into the strait and started on his trip. The next day, he himself for the first and last time during the war boarded a prize, the *Texan Star*, or *Martaban*. When sighted, she looked American, but was flying the English colors. The boarding officer found all the papers regular, but as she had been transferred within the last ten days from American to British ownership, and as the general appearances were all American, he requested the captain to go aboard the *Alabama* to visit Semmes. He refusing and Semmes having no authority to compel a foreigner to come aboard, there was nothing to be done except for the captain of the *Alabama* to go to the other boat. As he noted her graceful lines, and splendid sails and rig-

ging, Semmes could see only "American" written all over her. The figures and faces of the officers almost shouted "New England" to him. These traits were still more impressed on the captain of the captive. "No amount of English custom house paper or sealing wax could by any possibility convert him into that rotund, florid, jocund Briton who personates the English shipmaster."

"When the papers were produced, I found among them no bill of sale or other evidence of the transfer of the property. . . . His crew list, which had been very neatly prepared, was a mute but powerful witness against him. It was written throughout, signatures and all, in the same hand—the signatures all being as like as two peas. After glancing at the papers, and making these mental observations as I went along, I asked the master a few questions. As well as I recollect he was from Hallowell, Maine. His ship had been two years in the East Indies, trading from port to port. . . . The freshly painted assumed name on her stern was scarcely dry. The master had sat with comparative composure during this examination and questioning, relying with great confidence upon his English flag and papers; but when I turned to him and told him that I should burn his ship, he sprang from his chair,

and said with excited manner and voice : ‘ You dare not do it, sir. That flag,’ pointing to the flag flying from his peak, ‘ won’t stand it.’ ‘ Keep cool, captain,’ I replied ; ‘ the weather is warm, and as for the flag, I shall not ask it whether it will stand it or not—the flag that ought to be at your peak will have to stand it though.’ In half an hour . . . the *Texan Star*, alias *Martaban*, was in flames.”

It was a daring thing to do, almost a foolhardy one, as Semmes was taking desperate chances of a mistake that might have been fatal. If it had turned out to be a *bona fide* sale, then he would have affronted the only friends he had in this eastern venture. But his insight was keen, his judgment true, as subsequent confession proved.

In the afternoon, after the captain had had leisure to calm down and think matters over, he was called into Semmes’ cabin, put under oath before the prize court, and addressed : “ Now, captain, when you and I had that little conversation in your cabin, you had hopes of saving your ship, and moreover what you said to me was not under oath. You were perhaps only practicing a pardonable *ruse de guerre*. But now the case is altered. Your ship being destroyed, you have no longer any possible interest in misstating the truth. Be frank ; was, or was

not, the transfer of your ship a *bona fide* transaction?"

"I will be frank with you, captain," he replied. "It was not a *bona fide* transaction. I was alarmed when I heard of your arrival in the East Indies, and I resorted to a sham sale in the hope of saving my ship." Semmes tersely remarks: "Upon this answer being recorded, the court adjourned." That night the captives were landed on English territory.

Some two days later, on the morning after Christmas, 1863, two Massachusetts boats, in ballast, were captured, the *Sonora* and the *Highlander*, both "monster ships" of some twelve hundred tons burden. They had been safe in Singapore harbor. Judging that the *Alabama* had gone on up the Asiatic coast, they had started through the Straits of Malacca, but had been delayed by head winds and were at anchor waiting for a fair breeze to bear them on out into the Indian Ocean. One of the captains took the mishap quite good-humoredly. As he came on the *Alabama's* deck, he offered his hand, and cheerily said: "Well, Captain Semmes, I have been expecting every day for the last three years to fall in with you, and here I am at last." Semmes pleasantly replied that it was a nice thing to find him after so long a search. "Search!"

said he ; “it is some such search as the devil may be supposed to make after holy water. The fact is, I have had constant visions of the *Alabama* by night and by day ; she has been chasing me in my sleep, and riding me like a nightmare, and now that it is all over, I feel quite relieved.” Such a superior soul may have felt keen pangs at seeing the torch applied to his ship, but it is a safe deduction that no weakness shone in his face. Under his fearless lead, it was possibly an agreeable trip back to Singapore in the boats which Semmes permitted to be loaded with provisions and other necessaries before the flames devoured both vessels.

Semmes passed out into the Indian Ocean, thence on across it, doubled the island of Ceylon, and sailed up the Malabar coast, taking the *Emma Jane* about the middle of January, 1864, the only haul made on that long sail from the Straits of Malacca to Cape Town. The *Emma Jane* had no cargo, and there were no complications as to neutral property. She was burned and her crew landed on Indian ground.

Enveloped and driven by the northeast “trades,” the *Alabama* stretched across the Arabian Sea for the Comoro Islands. It was a blessed voyage nearly all the way,—fair wind, delightful weather. “For

twelve successive days we did not have occasion to lower a studdingsail, day or night. We had a constant series of clear skies and gentle breezes. The nights were serene and transparent, and the sunsets were magnificent beyond description. The trade wind is *par excellence* the wind of beautiful sunsets. Bright, gauzy clouds float along lazily before it, and sometimes the most charming cumuli are piled up on the western horizon while the sun is going down. Stately cathedrals, with their domes and spires complete, may be traced by the eye of fancy, and the most gorgeous of golden, violet, orange, purple, green and other hues, light up now a colonnade, now a dome, and now a spire of the aerial edifice. And then came on the twilight, with its gray and purple blended, and with the twilight the sound of merriment on board the *Alabama*." Thus tenderly and eloquently does this imperious commander paint the glories of the heavens and the rapturous influence it exerted on the spirits of men seeking to harm their enemies wherever they might find them.

He anchored at Johanna, the chief of the Comoro group. He remained there for about a week, being kindly received by the dark-skinned Mohammedan peoples. It was a good chance to get fresh meat

and provisions, but was a dull episode for the sailors. There were no grog, no dancing, no merry partners. Jack tried going ashore once, but he was glad to get back, and happy that the *Alabama* went southward toward the theater of civilized amusements.

Though wayward in mood, turbulent in anger, and riotous in liquor, the sailor often has the noblest impulse in the heart of man,—love for his brother, to the risking of his own life for him, the sacrifice of it if need be. A precious instance was afforded on the *Alabama* after she had got far down toward the Cape of Good Hope. One of the officers has left a fine appreciation of the deed, as well as Semmes' hearty recognition of it.

“The wind is blowing a good topgallant breeze, with a clear sky and rather a frisky sea. One of the crew, who had been on the sick list for a long time, now convalescent, was ordered by the surgeon to be carried on deck for sun and fresh air. While lying on the topgallant forecastle, by some means not positively known, the man went overboard to leeward. At once the cry was given, ‘Man overboard!’ . . . The vessel was at a standstill in a twinkling, with the struggling invalid some distance astern, battling with feeble strength for life. Mars took in the situation instantly. Seizing a grating, he rushed to the lee gangway, and throwing it overboard ahead of him mounted the rail. Meanwhile



the first lieutenant reached the deck, and observing the intent of Mars, ordered him not to go to the rescue of his comrade in such rough water ; the boat could pick the man up, and one of the crew was enough to lose if any. But his order was not heeded ; humanity had asserted itself, and all thought of the gravity of the disobedience of orders was thrown by Mars to the winds. Only replying, 'Keep cool, Mr. Kell, I will save the poor fellow,' he swam rapidly to the now nearly exhausted sailor. He reached him, and, shoving the grating under him, awaited the approach of the life-boat, . . . the invalid being more dead than alive. A wild yell broke from the throats of the gallant tars. The boat hoisted to the davits, the vessel was once more on her course.

"Semmes had officers and crew mustered on the quarter-deck, and, mounting the horse-block, in a speech of ten minutes, delivered a flattering tribute to the superb gallantry of the man. He called upon the rest of the officers and crew to emulate his example in all hours of danger and trial. The speech was an indorsement any man might be proud to receive from his commander. At the conclusion of the remarks, . . . as the crew were strolling forward, Mars, with a hitch of the trousers so common with Jack Tars, remarked, 'The captain has made a bloody fuss over nothing.' During the entire time occupied by Semmes in addressing officers and crew, Mars stood hat in hand, head down, and blushing like a schoolgirl at the well-earned compliments showered upon him."<sup>1</sup>

It is the mark of a great leader to seize the

<sup>1</sup> Sinclair, "Two Years on the *Alabama*," pp. 227-9.

psychological moment for bestowing a tribute upon a subordinate for gallant conduct. Such executive wisdom inspires his followers, and strengthens the bond of loyalty. It may have nerved Mars a few months later to other acts of heroism and devotion at the sinking of the *Alabama*.

Without further incident of note, the *Alabama* soon anchored in Cape Town, just six months away on her bold run to the East Indies. Semmes was at once involved in a diplomatic battle, and, as nearly always in these contests, he vanquished his adversaries. The *Tuscaloosa*, the tender which Semmes had commissioned on the Atlantic outside of all jurisdiction, had obeyed orders to cruise along the Brazilian coast and then return to South Africa. When she made the British port of Simon's Town, she had been apprehended by the authorities under orders from the Home Government on the ground that she had not been condemned in a prize court, and in consequence should not have been allowed in a British harbor since that nation along with other great powers had refused the right of entry to prizes of either belligerent in the Civil War in the United States. Semmes, of course, demolished that position, basing his reasoning on the principle of international law accepted by the United States supreme court,

that a nation could not inquire into the antecedents of a ship of war, and that her commission from competent authority constitutes her a part of the territory of that sovereign body, and she can no more be seized than a portion of the soil without such seizure becoming an act of war. He, Semmes, was an officer of a belligerent, with full right to commission a tender, a right that the British admirals often exercised. The *Tuscaloosa* under the protection of this document had visited British ports and been treated as a belligerent. It was true that she had not been put through a prize court, but her commission as a tender of the *Alabama* was a far stronger title than a court could give. Of course she had been the property of the citizens of the other belligerent, and had been captured and sent forth as a cruiser, but no nation had the right to ask for anything further than her commission. If that was in due form, she was just as much entitled to belligerent privileges as the *Alabama* or any other ship of war.

The local officials could not return the boat to her commander or to Semmes ; they could only transmit his protests and arguments to the central power in London. In due time an order came for the restoration of the *Tuscaloosa* to her commander, but

he had long since departed, and as the war was drawing near its close, she fell back into the hands of her original owners. But Semmes had gained one legal triumph; he had got one point of law settled, that "one nation cannot inquire into the antecedents of the ships of war of another nation."

## CHAPTER XIII

### THE END OF THE "ALABAMA"

THIS little international duel with pens had no effect upon the general heartiness of the English greeting of the *Alabama* on her second visit. Her decks were thronged with civilians and officials, with sightseers, and with well-wishers from shore. But she did not allow either welcome or curiosity to hold her. As rapidly as possible she was refurnished and recoaled and after three days she was off again,—this time up the Atlantic looking for some available repair yard.

Before she came to Cape Town, Semmes had admitted: "My ship is weary too, as well as her commander, and will need a general overhauling by the time I can get her into a dock." It was his intention "to make the best of my way to England or France, for the purpose of docking and thoroughly overhauling and repairing my ship." Yet he had a presentiment that the cruises of the *Alabama* were about at an end. Confederate fortunes on land were sinking, and it seemed a dramatic fitness that the

greatest Confederate champion on water should go down at the same pace. Her captain's spirit was still unconquerable, but his body, like the *Alabama's* frame, was racking down : " Vigils by night and by day, the storm and the drenching rain, the frequent and rapid change of climate, now freezing, now melting or broiling, and the constant excitement of the chase and capture had laid, in the three years of war he had been afloat, the load of a dozen years on his shoulders. The shadows of a sorrowful future, too, began to rest upon his spirit."

Though the *Alabama* was limping to her lair, she added two more numbers to her roster of conquest, the *Rockingham* and the *Tycoon*, both caught below the equator, and both burnt. She passed on by the Azores, boarding numerous neutrals, but finding no hostile flag. Early in the morning with hope still ahead, in spite of gloomy news from home, the *Alabama* made the port of Cherbourg, France, on June 11, 1864. Semmes aimed to go into dock, give his crew two months' leave, wait till all was ready, and then take to sea again. But there were only government docks here, and the Emperor's permission had to be obtained before the privilege of using one of them could be granted. He was at Biarritz, and would not be back in Paris for several days. In

the meantime, the *Kearsarge*, off Flushing, hearing of the *Alabama's* presence down the channel, came on the 14th, steamed into the harbor, and then out beyond the breakwater and there stationed herself.

Semmes saw his chance for a trial of strength with his foe. He had been fully determined over in the East Indies to engage the *Wyoming* if he had come across her, and now he sent for Kell and announced that he was going to fight the *Kearsarge*. He had had target practice at the *Rockingham*, and while the gunnery was good, the shells in several instances had not exploded, and it was clear that the quality of the powder had deteriorated. Kell knew all this, and gently intimated that it was a handicap ; but he saw that Semmes was firm in his decision, and he discussed what it was best to do in preparation. Kell himself was always ready for a set-to, and had long wanted one. Of course the other officers were just as willing as soon as they learned of the chance of it.

The British tars, composing most of the crew, were eager for the fray. From tradition and from ancestry, the fighting instinct in them was strong, and they were keen for any danger. Besides they were within sound of Old England, the home of so many of them, and their ardor was kindled, and

their pulses quickened by a song, the last song, of the ship's poet :

“ We're homeward, we're homeward bound,  
And soon shall stand on English ground.  
But ere that English land we see,  
We first must fight the *Kearsarge*.” <sup>1</sup>

On the 15th, the day after the *Kearsarge* got to Cherbourg, her captain, John A. Winslow, received word that Semmes wanted to fight him, communication having been made through the respective consular representatives. Semmes had notified his superior in Paris of his purpose, and had been directed to use his discretion. A presentiment of battle was felt among the crew, and there were conjectures and rumors, gossip and idle predictions on land among the French townspeople, but Semmes was not the man to keep a still tongue in his head for three years as to his plans, and then at the supreme crisis to turn it loose to wag at random. It was not known generally, in fact it was positively known to only a few, though of course all the crew and other observers could infer for one or two days preceding the engagement what was ahead.

The train-load from Paris did not come down to

<sup>1</sup> “ Cruise of the *Alabama*,” p. 135.



witness the battle. It was a regular Sunday excursion made weekly through the warm season, and that was the first of the series that summer.<sup>1</sup> In fact Bullock, who was in a position to speak authoritatively, says that outside of the special officials very few had notice of the coming contest. Of course when the *Alabama* began to move out, all who could rushed to the highest places to view the struggle. The "congregation was dismissed and peasants, soldiers, nuns, and curé passed out of the church to watch the fight from the cliffs." Others climbed towers, stood on roofs, and looked out of windows.

Outside, a few miles away from shore, quietly lay the *Kearsarge*, with the captain going through the usual routine of Sunday morning. She had been idly moving to and fro for several days waiting for her challenger to come out. Although made on opposite sides of the Atlantic, the two ships were almost "evenly matched in size, armament, and crew." The *Alabama* was 220 feet long, the *Kearsarge* 214; the *Alabama's* beam was thirty-two feet, the *Kearsarge's* thirty-four; the *Alabama's* depth was seventeen feet, the *Kearsarge's* sixteen; the *Alabama's* tonnage was 1,150, the *Kearsarge's* 1,031; the *Alabama's* armament was one 8-inch Blakely,

<sup>1</sup> Prentice in *Harper's Monthly*, Nov., 1910, Vol. 121, p. 873.

one 8-inch shell gun, and six 32-pounders, all British,—the *Kearsarge's* was two 11-inch guns, one 30-pounder, and four 32-pounders, all American; the *Alabama* had a total force of 149, the majority being British, fifty-nine being of the original eighty-five that enlisted at Terceira when the *Alabama* was commissioned; the *Kearsarge* force was 163, all but eleven being native Americans.<sup>1</sup> While the *Alabama* had eight guns to the *Kearsarge's* seven, the total weight of metal from the *Kearsarge* was about twenty per cent. more than that from the *Alabama*. The *Alabama* was about two years old, the *Kearsarge* six months older. The *Kearsarge* had been in dock for repairs less than three months before, the *Alabama* had never been in dock since she was launched. But taking it all in all, aside from the *Kearsarge's* recent docking, "it is hardly probable that two ships more equally matched will ever fight in single combat."<sup>2</sup> There is also historic significance in the fact that it was the first open sea fight of importance between two steam vessels substantially equal, provided with modern ordnance.

There was also a parallelism in the careers of the

<sup>1</sup> Bennett, "Steam Navy of U. S.," p. 431.

<sup>2</sup> Ellicott's "Winslow," p. 191.

two captains. They were born at nearly the same time, Semmes being two years the senior. Both were Southerners, Semmes from Maryland, Winslow from North Carolina. Both had been midshipmen in the Old Navy. Both had served gallantly in the Mexican War, and, singular to relate, each had lost a vessel in a storm off Vera Cruz. They had afterward been shipmates, messmates, and roommates. Winslow had been on the *Kearsarge* two months over one year, while Semmes lacked two months of completing two years on the *Alabama*. They had been playing the game of hide-and-seek in the Atlantic since Winslow had been assigned to the *Kearsarge*. Of course both men were of the highest character and courage.

Exactly a week before Winslow had been coming down the Scheldt, the inhabitants being crowded on the banks to take a look at the boat. The crew were all mustered and Winslow uttered a few plain, manly words to them: "Men, I congratulate you in saying that the *Alabama* has arrived at Cherbourg, and the *Kearsarge*, having a good name in France and England, is to have her cruising ground off that port." Upon this, "a patriotic young Irishman stepped forward and proposed three cheers for the success of the *Kearsarge*, and was

responded to by both crew and officers ; and then three cheers for Captain Winslow, and they were given with a will. Captain Winslow said he hoped that every man would be on the lookout, and ready at a moment's notice, as we were leaving the Belgium and Holland coast, perhaps never to look on them again."<sup>1</sup>

Now a more mercurial folk, farther south on the Atlantic shore, were massed on the prominences to see these two enemies come together in deadly encounter. As they neared one another on that bright Sabbath morn in June, some of those aboard may have thought of the historic waters they were to battle in, that in that stretch between Continental Europe and England had been enacted stirring scenes ;—that Cæsar with his mighty Roman legions had crossed that arm of the ocean, that along the shores the Northmen had ravaged, that in that channel the Spanish Armada had been dispersed.

Perhaps the martial ardor and the fighting blood of the French had something to do with Semmes' decision here and now to cast his die on the issue. In military circles it was considered a challenge for the *Kearsarge* to steam into the harbor in proximity

<sup>1</sup>Diary kept on *Kearsarge*, "N. E. Hist. Gen. Reg.," Vol. 35, p. 341.

to the *Alabama*, and then pass out again. As no word had come from the Emperor, Semmes could not go into dock, and he did not care to remain there bottled up. The local papers may have spurred him on by their sentiments, as they declared that he and his men must be tired of a life of attacking only defenseless craft. They thought it would be glorious for him to grapple with the foe even if he should be defeated. The Confederate representative in Paris declared that Semmes, when delayed in his aim to dock, was placed "in a situation which prevented him from declining without dishonor a combat in which his vessel was lost." Public opinion, in a word, seemed to look on the engagement as a matter of honor on the part of the *Alabama's* captain and crew. Whatever his motives, it was a deed of daring to go boldly out in his limping ship against a watchful enemy in first class trim.

He was attended by a French war-ship to guard against any violation of neutrality. Semmes says :

"Everything being in readiness, between nine and ten o'clock, we got under way and proceeded to sea, through the western entrance of the harbor ; the *Couronne* following us. As we emerged from behind the mole, we discovered the *Kearsarge* at a distance of between six and seven miles from the

land. She had been apprised of our intention of coming out that morning and was awaiting us. We were three-quarters of an hour in running out to the *Kearsarge*, during which time we had gotten our people to quarters, cast loose the battery, and made all necessary preparations for battle. The crew had been particularly neat in their dress on that morning, and the officers were all in the uniforms appropriate to their rank. As we were approaching the enemy's ship, I caused the crew to be sent aft, within convenient reach of my voice, and mounting a gun carriage delivered them the following brief address. I had not spoken to them in this formal way since I had addressed them on the memorable occasion of commissioning my ship :

“ ‘Officers and Seamen of the *Alabama* : You have at length another opportunity of meeting the enemy—the first that has been presented to you since you sank the *Hatteras*. In the meantime you have been all over the world, and it is not too much to say that you have destroyed and driven for protection under neutral flags one-half of the enemy's commerce, which at the beginning of the war covered every sea. This is an achievement of which you may well be proud ; and a grateful country will not be unmindful of it. The name of your ship has become a household word wherever civilization extends. Shall that name be tarnished by defeat ? The thing is impossible. Remember that you are in the English Channel, the theater of so much of the naval glory of our race, and that the eyes of all Europe are at this moment upon you. The flag that floats over you is that of a young Republic, who bids defiance to her enemies whenever and wherever found. Show the world that you know how to uphold it. Go to your quarters.’ ”

He adds: "The utmost silence prevailed during the delivery of this address, broken only once in an enthusiastic outburst of 'Never! Never!'" when he asked his sailors "if they would permit the name of their ship to be tarnished by defeat."

The *Kearsarge* had been keenly watching for five days for this crisis, with every soul on board keyed up to the highest pitch. On this morning, while the captain was conducting religious services, the man aloft sang out, "A steamer is coming and I believe it to be the *Alabama*." It is said that "the drum immediately beat to quarters and in two minutes every man was at his station ready for action."<sup>1</sup>

Winslow had been urged by the United States Minister in Paris to be careful not to come within the marine league of shore, and if he felt safe it would be better to get off six or seven miles so as to avoid all chance of diplomatic protests. Bearing all this caution in mind, he steamed out farther to sea. When he was certain of his distance he came back and one of the most memorable conflicts of naval warfare opened.

Semmes had counted the sun flashing on the waters as a good sign for the *Alabama*, and had unbent so

<sup>1</sup>Diary in "N. E. Hist. Gen. Reg.," Vol. 35, p. 343.

far as to do something very unusual with him. After saying, "If the bright, beautiful day is shining for our benefit, we should be happy at the omen," he asked one of his lieutenants, "How do you think it will turn out to-day, Mr. Sinclair?" This surprised the officer very much as "he rarely addressed any of us off duty, and never asked advice or opinion of his subordinates on weighty matters; at least not to my knowledge." He got only the cautious reply of a subordinate: "I cannot answer the question, sir, but can assure you the crew will do their full duty, and follow you to the death." Semmes knew that this was true, and he resumed his usual pacing of the quarter-deck, and so continued as the ship bore the brave crew down toward the *Kearsarge*, for so many a scene of death.

With glass in hand Semmes stood on one of the horse-blocks in an exposed but advantageous position for directing the work of his force and for observing the *Kearsarge*. When the latter was some seven miles from land, she wheeled and came for the *Alabama* end-on, intending if it seemed feasible to ram her foe; but the *Alabama* sheered to one side, and, when the two were about a mile apart, Semmes opened fire. The first broadside did no damage, as most of the shot went wild, only one



striking the *Kearsarge's* rigging. Two more broadsides followed so rapidly that Winslow gave up all thought of boarding, and began action himself, now that he was in sufficient nearness for his guns to take effect, as the *Alabama* had the longer range. The fight speedily became very warm, and, in order not to pass each other, each ship sheered so that they fought in circles or loops, some seven in all, bearing toward the shore all the while. Early in the action, one man was killed and another wounded on the *Alabama*, and then for a time neither seemed able to get the range of the other and no damage of any moment was done. In fact in the first half of the contest the advantage seemed to be with Semmes. He sent a 100-pound shell crashing into the *Kearsarge* amidship, and his crew, believing that it had penetrated her boilers, cheered loudly, but it had passed through the engine-room skylight. Right after this, another of these shells struck under her counter, glanced and lodged in her stern-post, but unfortunately for Semmes did not explode. If it had done so, he was sure that it would have permanently disabled her, but some expert opinion on the other side is just as positive that no substantial harm would have been suffered, although six weeks later in an official despatch Winslow stated that it

bound "the rudder so hard as to require four men at the helm," and Browne, the *Kearsarge* surgeon, twenty years after admits that "luckily the shell did not explode, otherwise the result would have been serious, if not fatal." Almost at the same time another shell exploded on the quarter-deck wounding three men, one of whom afterward died. Another exploded in the smoke-stack, tearing an enormous hole.

Semmes had been closely watching the effect of his guns, and noted that many shells that struck the *Kearsarge* fell back into the water. He called Kell's attention to this and ordered the use of solid shot, but these did not penetrate the *Kearsarge* any better, because of the chain armor upon her sides. But there are competent judges to assert that the shots struck at such height above the water line that no serious hurt would have been inflicted, even if they had entered. Here, again, Semmes believed the victory would have been his if the *Kearsarge* had not been protected as she was. By this time, however, Winslow's gunner had their range, and the distance was all in favor of his heavy pieces. His weighty charges began to pierce their way into the *Alabama*, doing terrible havoc. One hit her best cannon, put it entirely out of gear, and disabled

eighteen men. He ordered his gunners to aim low so as to plough through below the water line. A lucky shot damaged the rudder so that substitutes had to be devised for steering. The ship was hulled repeatedly, and her decks were like shambles. Semmes, having great faith in the prowess of his men in a hand to hand struggle, wanted to run up to the *Kearsarge* and board her, but Winslow easily kept off as he had the superior speed. Finally two eleven-inch shells passed through the *Alabama's* bunkers at the water line, the water poured into the heart of the ship, and she began to sink. Semmes tried to head for the shore, and set out sails for that purpose. Winslow saw the move and got inshore to rake her, but she settled so fast that there was no hope of reaching the marine league. Semmes ordered her colors down, sent an officer to make a surrender of his ship and men to the foe, and set to work to get out his wounded for despatch to the *Kearsarge*. The bulk of the boats on both vessels had been destroyed, and at the most there were only some four or five in all available. Many of the wounded were placed on these, when the *Alabama* could float no longer. Lifting her bow straight up in the air, something after midday and less than an hour and a half after she fired her first gun, "the scourge of

the seas" that had been pursued by twenty-five war-ships at a cost of seven million dollars, sank into the ocean over which she had been a matchless queen for nearly two years. Not even a splinter from her passed to her conquerors as a memento of their triumph. Two of her boats and the shell which lodged in the stern-post of the *Kearsarge* were the only souvenirs.

Just before her final plunge into the deep, the order had been given, "All hands save yourselves!" The captain and his first officer, the faithful and efficient Kell, threw off their outer clothing. For the second time in his life, Semmes sprang into the sea from a sinking boat of which he had just been in command. He could not act with any vigor in the water as his right arm was almost useless, having been struck by the fragment of a shell during the battle, although he continued in full charge after having it bound up by a quartermaster. With Kell's aid he kept afloat until he was picked up by a boat from the English yacht *Deerhound*, which, after viewing the contest, had come near the *Kearsarge* and had been asked to help save the unfortunates. While one of her boats was passing near a drowning man, a sailor recognized him as Semmes, who spoke up, "I am the captain; save me. I cannot keep up

any longer." He was quickly pulled aboard, placed on the bottom and covered with a sail to conceal him from the *Kearsarge* searchers. He is reported to have said, "For God's sake, don't put me on board the *Kearsarge*, but put me on your yacht." Kell was rescued at the same time, and it was he who suggested the concealment of Semmes to prevent recognition by any of the *Kearsarge's* men. Kell put on one of the *Deerhound* hats, took an oar, and answered a *Kearsarge* inquiry as to whether or not Semmes was saved by saying clearly and positively, "No, he is drowned."<sup>1</sup> In a few minutes they were both on the *Deerhound*, and that same day were landed at Southampton.<sup>2</sup>

With the months of Semmes' training on ship, and under his guidance and inspiration during the fight, these men, gathered from all parts of the globe, uniformly faced death unblenched. The surgeon,

<sup>1</sup> *London News*, June 21, 1864; and Sinclair's "Two Years on the *Alabama*," p. 279.

<sup>2</sup> An English colonial officer of standing and experience, Sir George F. Bowen, relates, in Vol. I, p. 332 of his "Autobiography," that on the visit of the *Kearsarge* to New Zealand in 1868 he was informed by her captain that the *Kearsarge* officers recognized Semmes in the water and let the *Deerhound* boat save him, as they were afraid if he was captured by the Federal forces he "might be tried, and hanged, for treason, in the civil courts—a fate from which they wished to save a gallant enemy."

an Englishman, who had joined the Southern cause purely out of a sense of what he considered just and right, forgot all of self, remained until knee-deep in the water that had entered his sick bay, doing all he could to save the wounded. When told the ship was sinking, and that he had better haste, he calmly answered: "I must wait for orders, you know." Finally he did get his charges off, but again he may have waited for orders to go with them. After the boat had pushed off, he let it be known that he could not swim, and a float was arranged for him, but by its shifting he very likely lost his life.

One of the sailors, though mortally wounded, denied that he was hurt and continued on duty until he fell dead on deck. Another was sent aloft on some task. When descending he was "completely disemboweled," but in this desperate plight he climbed down to the spar-deck, "and with shrieks of agony, and his hands over his head, beating the air convulsively, reached the port gangway, where he fell and expired." The lower part of the arm of the captain's coxswain was so shattered that it hung by the skin. He coolly took out his knife, cut it off, tied up the stump and went on with his work as well as he could with one arm.

A pathetic instance of the tender attachment existing between superior and subordinate is preserved in the case of a generous whole-souled Irishman, of powerful frame, but an awkward landsman, nicknamed Connemara from his native heath,—the butt of his comrades, whose pranks he so often and so hotly resented that he was a burden of anxiety to the executive officer. With death only a little way from him, he was being passed over to one of the *Kearsarge* boats, when he desired to see the first lieutenant. Stretching out his feeble hand he said : "I have sent for you, Mr. Kell, to ask your forgiveness for all the trouble I've caused you since my enlistment on the ship. Please forgive poor Connemara now he is going to his long home." Kell knelt down and stroking his head assured him : "My poor, dear boy, I have nothing to forgive ; nothing against you, my brave lad ; and I trust you will be in better trim soon." "No," was the answer, "Connemara is going fast. Good-bye, Mr. Kell ; God bless you, Mr. Kell," as he reverently and loyally kissed Kell's hand.

But no man on either side exhibited greater coolness or finer devotion to his chief than another son of Erin, Michael Mars, the same who had been signally honored by Semmes before the entire ship's

company for his daring unselfishness in the rescue of a sick sailor who had fallen overboard in the Indian Ocean. He, with a companion, caught up an eleven-inch shell that was about to explode on the deck and threw it over the rail. A few minutes later all his mates were struck in the bursting of another shell, many being horribly mangled, and the human flesh scattered all around. He himself was thrown down but not injured, and instantly rising and seizing a shovel he soon had the ghastly fragments overboard and the decks again sanded. When it was time to desert the sinking vessel, Semmes entrusted his valuable papers to Mars, who, holding them in one hand above the water, swam to a *Kearsarge* boat, but learning this sprang out and was picked up by a French boat. He again jumped into the water, and was rescued by a *Deerhound* boat. When he at last got to that ship, he would give his precious packet to no one but Semmes himself.

But whatever the fiery spirit, the martial ardor, the dauntless control, and the noble self-sacrifice of these men, they were matched by their enemies on the *Kearsarge* in the same glorious qualities. For over a year she had been going to and fro on the Atlantic, steaming hither and thither at the beck of



consul or minister, or at the call of rumor, hunting for the elusive, cunning *Alabama*. With tireless drill they had perfected their gunnery, had hardened their muscles, had tempered their sinews, and steadied their nerves. For five days had they been strained to the highest tension outside of Cherbourg. At last they were at the apex of fate, at the culmination of dreams. But their discipline held them firm at this crisis in their days. They were calm, their hands unshaken, their sight direct. Deliberately they planted shot and shell on the *Alabama*. As their deadly work began to tell, their enthusiasm flamed forth. "Cheer succeeded cheer, caps were thrown in the air or overboard, jackets discarded, one encouraging the other, sanguine of victory, shouting as each projectile took effect: 'That's a good one!' 'That told!' 'Give her another!' 'Down, boys, give her another like the last!' 'Now we have her.'"

Only one man was hurt badly enough to make opportunity for noble fortitude or forgetfulness of self, but he was so simple, so sincere in his heroism as to be a beacon light for the entire ship's company. His bearing was well worthy to be embalmed in the official despatches: "Gowin was brought with a smile upon his face, although suffering acutely from

his injury. He said, 'It is all right and I am satisfied, for we are whipping the *Alabama*,' adding, 'I willingly will lose my leg or life if it is necessary.' During the progress of the action he comforted his suffering comrades by assuring them, 'Victory is ours.' Whenever the gun's crew cheered at the successful effect of their shot, Gowin would wave his hand over his head and join in the shout. In the hospital he was calmly resigned to his fate, repeating again and again his willingness to die, since his ship had won a glorious victory."

This was the surgeon's testimony. Similar tribute to his singleness of character did the executive officer render: "William Gowin, ordinary seaman, was severely wounded by the explosion of a shell. He dragged himself to the forward hatch, refusing to allow the men to leave his gun for the purpose of assisting him. His cheerful willingness to sacrifice his life for victory's sake was expressed in terms that animated and encouraged others."<sup>1</sup> It is no wonder that his shipmates determined to erect a monument to him in Cherbourg, and that the American residents in Paris contributed a sum for a memorial to him in his native town in Michigan.

Of course a crew of his type could appreciate the

<sup>1</sup> "Naval War Records," Series I, Vol. III, pp. 62, 70.

fearlessness of their foes, and were too brave to exult in the hour of the *Alabama's* defeat. All were silent, when the terrible rover of the oceans went down, carrying many brave men to death.

It is not possible to state accurately the fate of each man, but virtually all are accounted for by one of the most careful investigations of the catastrophe. Of her roster of 147-149, twenty-six were killed and drowned, seventy wounded and sound were taken to the *Kearsarge*, while forty-two were placed on the *Deerhound*, and nine on a French pilot boat.<sup>1</sup>

Such was the sacrifice of brave men for a mistress that was worthy of the immolation. She had been a thing of life for only twenty-two months, but she had swept in her pride unharmed over two oceans, had entered numerous ports, had coaled at ten, receiving on board in all about 1,800 tons of fuel. She had taken two thousand prisoners, had boarded 386 vessels, had constituted cartel-ships of some half a dozen, had bonded ten, had made a tender of one, had sold another, had sunk a third, and had burnt fifty-two. No trophies were left of her victories, as the flags she had won went down with her.

What lords of lucre would the crew have been if

<sup>1</sup> Ellicott's "Winslow," p. 207.

they could have got their prize money, as she had destroyed at a modest calculation nearly five million dollars' worth of property. Nothing of the wealth that was hers came to any of them except from the seventy odd chronometers, which, being transferred to a British ship before the fight, eventually reached land and were sold, the proceeds being shared out by Semmes in due proportion to the officers.

The entire crew were all paid in full by the paymaster from funds he had deposited on shore before going out that Sunday morning. In time the legal heirs of those lost in the battle also got their wages.

A third of a century after, the *Kearsarge* rounded out her days with a theatrical climax. Her victory marked the final drop of the curtain on sails and wooden walls, but popular sentiment kept her on the register although she was of no service except as a patriotic relic. Three decades later she went ashore on a reef in the Gulf of Mexico, and a party of wreckers dismantled and fired her. Among them was said to be a child of a member of the *Alabama's* crew, named "Admiral Semmes" by reason of the admiration the father had for his commander. "When everything worth saving was taken from the vessel, the hulk was burned and 'Admiral

Semmes,' the son of the seaman, applied the torch," thus, in a way, dramatically placing Semmes beside Winslow, each now having destroyed the other's boat.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Mobile Register*, June 7, 1900.

## CHAPTER XIV

### AFTERMATH OF THE BATTLE

A BLAZING meteor in life, the *Alabama* shone with greater brilliancy after death through the reflection of her rays. The dirges of defeat and the pæans of victory through the South and the North respectively were echoed in the expressions of sympathy and the felicitations on success in the civilized world. The officers made their reports, the observers gave their opinions, and controversies broke forth that raged for years, and that can still faintly be heard. The world gazed upon the lurid path that Semmes had lighted. His work affected the world's theories of naval warfare. It signalized a revolution in naval architecture, and a reconstruction of fleets. It marked the end of sails and opened vistas of steam for the ocean fighting of the future. The hour and a half off Cherbourg on that bright Sunday was Semmes' last battle, and also the crowning point of his remarkable career. His official report of that momentous event shows how he felt. The utterances of his foes furnish correctives. The

comments of contemporaries, of students and admirers are of great interest and weight.

Two days after the battle, as soon as his condition would allow, he penned the following to his superior in Paris :

“I have the honor to inform you that, in accordance with my intention as previously announced to you, I steamed out of the harbor of Cherbourg between nine and ten o'clock on the morning of the 19th of June, for the purpose of engaging the enemy's steamer *Kearsarge*, which had been lying off, and in the port, for several days previously. After clearing the harbor, we descried the enemy, with his head offshore, at a distance of about seven miles. We were three-quarters of an hour in coming up with him. I had previously pivoted my guns to starboard, and made all preparations for engaging the enemy on that side.

“When within about a mile and a quarter of the enemy, he suddenly wheeled, and, bringing his head inshore, presented his starboard battery to me. By this time we were distant about one mile from each other, when I opened on him with solid shot, to which he replied in a few minutes, and the action became active on both sides. The enemy now pressed his ship under a full head of steam, and to prevent our passing each other too speedily, and to keep our respective broadsides bearing, it became necessary to fight in a circle ; the two ships steaming around a common center, and preserving a distance from each other of from three-quarters to half a mile.

“When we got within good shell range, we opened upon him with shell. Some ten or fifteen

minutes after the commencement of the action, our spanker-gaff was shot away, and our ensign came down by the run. This was immediately replaced by another at the mizzenmast-head. The firing now became very hot, and the enemy's shot and shell soon began to tell upon our hull, knocking down, killing, and disabling a number of men, at the same time, in different parts of the ship. Perceiving that our shell, though apparently exploding against the enemy's sides, were doing him but little damage, I returned to solid-shot firing, and from this time onward alternated with shot and shell.

“After the lapse of about one hour and ten minutes, our ship was ascertained to be in a sinking condition, the enemy's shell having exploded in our side, and between decks, opening large apertures through which the water rushed with great rapidity. For some few minutes I had hopes of being able to reach the French coast, for which purpose I gave the ship all steam, and set such of the fore-and-aft sails as were available. The ship filled so rapidly, however, that before we had made much progress, the fires were extinguished in the furnaces, and we were evidently on the point of sinking. I now hauled down my colors, to prevent the further destruction of life, and despatched a boat to inform the enemy of our condition. Although we were now but four hundred yards from each other, the enemy fired upon me five times after my colors had been struck. It is charitable to suppose that a ship of war of a Christian nation could not have done this intentionally.

“We now directed all our exertions toward saving the wounded, and such of the boys of the ship as were unable to swim. These were despatched in my quarter-boats, the only boats remaining to me; the



waist-boats having been torn to pieces. Some twenty minutes after my furnace-fires had been extinguished, and when the ship was on the point of settling, every man, in obedience to a previous order which had been given the crew, jumped overboard, and endeavored to save himself. There was no appearance of any boat coming to me from the enemy, until after my ship went down. Fortunately, however, the steam yacht *Deerhound*, owned by a gentleman of Lancashire, England—Mr. John Lancaster—who was himself on board, steamed up in the midst of my drowning men and rescued a number of both officers and men from the water. I was fortunate enough myself thus to escape to the shelter of the neutral flag, together with about forty others, all told. About this time the *Kearsarge* sent one, and then, tardily, another boat.

“Accompanying, you will find lists of the killed and wounded, and of those who were picked up by the *Deerhound*; the remainder, there is reason to hope, were picked up by the enemy, and by a couple of French pilot boats, which were also fortunately near the scene of action. At the end of the engagement it was discovered by those of our officers who went alongside of the enemy’s ship with the wounded, that her mid-ship section, on both sides, was thoroughly iron-coated; this having been done with chains, constructed for the purpose, placed perpendicularly, from the rail to the water’s edge, the whole covered over by a thin outer planking, which gave no indication of the armor beneath. This planking had been ripped off, in every direction, by our shot and shell, the chain broken, and indented in many places, and forced partly into the ship’s side. She was effectually guarded, however, in this section, from pene-

tration. The enemy was much damaged in other parts, but to what extent it is now impossible to say. It is believed he is badly crippled.

“My officers and men behaved steadily and gallantly, and though they have lost their ship, they have not lost honor. Where all behaved so well, it would be invidious to particularize ; but I cannot deny myself the pleasure of saying that Mr. Kell, my first lieutenant, deserves great credit for the fine condition in which the ship went into action, with regard to her battery, magazine, and shell-rooms, and that he rendered me great assistance, by his coolness and judgment, as the fight proceeded. The enemy was heavier than myself, both in ship, battery, and crew ; but I did not know until the action was over that she was also iron-clad. Our total loss in killed and wounded is thirty, to wit : nine killed, twenty-one wounded.”

His opponent, Winslow, that afternoon at Cherbourg, wrote his formal account to Secretary Welles, as follows : “I have the honor to inform the Department that the day subsequent to the arrival of the *Kearsarge* off this port, on the 14th instant, I received a note from Captain Semmes, begging that the *Kearsarge* would not depart, as he intended to fight her, and would not delay her but a day or two.

“According to this notice the *Alabama* left the port of Cherbourg this morning at about 9 : 30 o'clock.

“At 10:20 A. M. we discovered her steering toward us. Fearing the question of jurisdiction might arise, we steamed to sea until a distance of six or seven miles was attained from the Cherbourg breakwater, when we rounded to and commenced steaming for the *Alabama*. As we approached her within 1,200 yards she opened fire, we receiving two or three broadsides before a shot was returned. The action continued, the respective steamers making a circle round and round at a distance of about 900 yards from each other. At the expiration of an hour, the *Alabama* struck, going down in about twenty minutes afterward, and carrying many persons with her.

“It affords me great gratification to announce to the Department that every officer and man did his duty, exhibiting a degree of coolness and fortitude which gave promise at the outset of certain victory.”

On the next day he drew up another report in which he states: “Although we received some twenty-five or thirty shots, twelve or fifteen taking effect in the hull, by the mercy of God we have been spared the loss of any one life, whereas in the case of the *Alabama* the carnage I learn was dreadful.” He states further that “the only shot which I fear will give us any trouble is one 100-pound

rifle, which entered our stern-post and remains at present unexploded.”

The day following, while at Cherbourg, he forwarded to the Secretary of the Navy this report :

“I have the honor to report that toward the close of the action between the *Alabama* and this vessel all available sail was made on the former for the purpose of again reaching Cherbourg. When the object was apparent the *Kearsarge* was steered across the bow of the *Alabama* for a raking fire, but before reaching this point, the *Alabama* struck. Uncertain whether Captain Semmes was not using some ruse, the *Kearsarge* was stopped. It was seen shortly afterward that the *Alabama* was lowering her boats, and an officer came alongside in one of them to say that they had surrendered and were fast sinking, and begging that boats would be despatched immediately for saving of life. The two boats not disabled were at once lowered, and it was apparent that the *Alabama* was settling. This officer was permitted to leave in his boat to afford assistance.

“An English yacht, the *Deerhound*, had approached near the *Kearsarge* at this time, when I hailed and begged the commander to run down to the *Alabama* as she was fast sinking, and we had but two boats, and assist in picking up the men. He answered affirmatively and steamed toward the *Alabama*, but the latter sank almost immediately. The *Deerhound*, however, sent her boats and was actively engaged, aided by several others which had come from shore.

“These boats were busy in bringing the wounded and others to the *Kearsarge*, whom we were trying

to make as comfortable as possible, when it was reported to me that the *Deerhound* was moving off. I could not believe that the commander of that boat could be guilty of so disgraceful an act as taking our prisoners off, and therefore took no means to prevent it, but continued to keep our boats at work rescuing the men in the water. I am sorry to say that I was mistaken; the *Deerhound* made off with Captain Semmes and others, and also the very officer who had come on board to surrender.

“I learned subsequently that the *Deerhound* was a consort of the *Alabama*, and that she received on board all the valuable personal effects of Captain Semmes the night before the engagement.”

It was perhaps unavoidable that sharp differences of attitude should develop on some points. Semmes was very bitter over the fire of the *Kearsarge*, as he believed, after he had hauled down his colors. Winslow in his longest despatch, that of July 30th, admits that he fired upon the *Alabama* after her flag was lowered, saying: “A few more guns, well directed, brought down her flag. I was unable to ascertain whether they had been hauled down or shot away, but a white flag having been displayed over the stern, our fire was reserved. Two minutes had not more than elapsed before she again opened on us with the two guns on the port side. This drew our fire again, and the *Kearsarge* was immediately steamed ahead, and laid across her bows

for raking. The white flag was still flying, and our fire was again reserved. Shortly after this her boats were seen to be lowering and an officer in one of them came alongside and informed us that the ship had surrendered and was fast sinking." Browne, the *Kearsarge* surgeon, testifies that Winslow was amazed at this renewal of firing and exclaimed: "He is playing us a trick; give him another broadside."

Kell and Sinclair, of the *Alabama's* officers, were both of the view that the *Kearsarge* fired on the *Alabama* after the latter had surrendered. But Kell grants that he did cease firing while the battery was being shifted to port and then began again. After a bit he hauled down his colors, ceased action entirely, and for good, and yet the *Kearsarge* discharged five shots upon them. As noted above Winslow says the *Alabama* ceased firing, "a white flag having been displayed over the stern," and then "again opened on us with the two guns on the port side," and he adds, "this drew our fire again."

With the exception of the white flag there is perfect uniformity in the two accounts up to this point as to the main facts, since both say the *Alabama* ceased firing, both say she began again on the port side, and both say the *Kearsarge* fired on her

after this, and both say that the *Alabama* then ceased absolutely.

It is from this point onward that the two accounts diverge. The three *Alabama* officers assert that after this unmistakable submission the *Kearsarge* fired upon them, while Winslow denies that he did so. If the three *Alabama* witnesses were independent, the burden of presumption would force acceptance of their version, but Kell and Sinclair writing after Semmes and following him so closely throughout, it is only a reasonable judgment that they unconsciously adopted his notion of this minor detail. That leaves the two captains balanced against each other. Both being intelligent, experienced, and honorable, they are equally entitled to credence and the question remains open, every one deciding it according to which captain he puts the more faith in. Earlier in the action, when the *Alabama*, after cessation, started again with the port guns, Winslow was apprehensive of a ruse, and possibly under the same fear he might have fired after the undoubted surrender. Or, with the lapse of two days, Semmes' memory may have played him a trick and confused two events, shifting the *Kearsarge's* firing after the *Alabama's* first cessation until it seemed to be after the *Alabama's* second cessation. Such psycholog-

ical movements are not unknown even during quiet, normal life; they are much more possible during great stress of mind and body.

After all, probably the best conclusion as to this painful matter is the charitable one reached by Sinclair: "The *Kearsarge* evidently failed to discover at once our surrender, for she continued her fire after our colors were struck; perhaps from the difficulty of noting the absence of a flag with so much white in it, in the powder smoke. But, be the reason what it may, a naval officer, a gentleman by birth and education, would certainly not be guilty of firing on a surrendered foe; hence we may dismiss the matter as an undoubted accident."<sup>1</sup> In full blend with this noble spirit is the characterization of Winslow at his death by Semmes himself: "He was the Christian gentleman."

Semmes' criticism of the *Kearsarge* for the chain armor along her sides was without any justification. Even if it had not been generally known, it would have been one of those deceptions wholly fair in war, just as allowable as tricks he had made use of in running up foreign colors to mislead a merchant boat. Besides, the device had been placed in position the year before, in the Azores, having been

<sup>1</sup> "Two Years on the *Alabama*," p. 259.



adopted after similar precautions had been taken in the early part of the war along the coast or on the rivers in the United States. There had been no secret about the matter. The *Kearsarge* had been in dock in England several months before the battle, and the officials there had full knowledge of her condition. Within a week after the loss of the *Alabama* the ministry were questioned in the House of Commons whether it was advisable or not to learn about this method of protection, and it was answered that the government already had full information which was obtained when the *Kearsarge* was repaired in an English port.<sup>1</sup>

Furthermore, Sinclair asserts that a sympathetic French officer "manifested a fellow feeling and interest in the lone, expatriated exponent of the Confederacy by informing Semmes a day or so before the fight that an officer detailed to visit the *Kearsarge* in the offing had reported the fact of the chain armor arranged on the ship, and strongly advised Semmes not to engage her, for that nothing but unlooked-for good luck could throw the scales our way."

Semmes' contention that he would have been the conqueror if it had not been for this armor is

<sup>1</sup> London *Times*, June 25, 1864.

strongly backed up by the executive officer of the *Kearsarge*, who wrote to a friend four days after the combat "the chain was struck twice by the heaviest projectiles and unquestionably saved us from damage."<sup>1</sup>

The whole device consisted of spare cables hung in bights over the sides of the *Kearsarge* to protect the machinery. It was all painted black. There were a hundred and twenty fathoms of sheet chains of one and seven-tenths inch iron, "covering a space amidships of forty-nine and one-half feet in length by six feet two inches in depth." This use of chains had attracted notice in the European ports visited, and there was every opportunity for Semmes to know about it. There is a counter assertion that this advantage was offset by the full coal bunkers of the *Alabama*. Those of the *Kearsarge* were deficient some seventy tons.

But the collateral incident that caused the most pleasure among Southern sympathizers, the most "thoughtless wailing" among the Federals, the greatest acerbity in the English press, and the widest and longest discussion in naval and international circles, was the escape of Semmes and a part of his force in the *Deerhound*. Yet shorn of triumph,

<sup>1</sup> Ellicott's "Winslow," p. 245.

stripped of prejudice, and divested of disappointment, it becomes a very simple and natural act, one that would have aroused no feeling beyond interest at the dramatic finish of a wonderful cruise, if it had not been dragged into the whirlpool of the bitterness of a Civil War. The battle was over, the *Alabama* was forever in her watery grave, but here were a number of human beings struggling and drowning in the waves. At this instant the English yacht which had been hovering around viewing the contest came up. It was simple humanity for Winslow, whose boats had been mostly destroyed, to shout, "For God's sake, save all you can," and it was the most instinctive prompting for the *Deerhound* to get as many aboard as she could. After once setting foot on her, the rescued were on English soil, and of course were free from their conquerors.

The owner, John Lancaster, being "a gentleman of ease and fortune," had come to Cherbourg from a Continental trip in order to embark on his steam yacht *Deerhound* which had been ordered to meet him there for a cruise of a few weeks northward. Hearing of the anticipated contest, he consulted with his family about going out to view the engagement. The story runs that it was a tie vote among his children, till his little daughter voted "yes" at

the instigation of a brother who, boy-like of course, wanted to see the fight.

Semmes and Lancaster were entire strangers. The former says that they had never "seen each other, or held the least communication together, until I was drawn out of the water by his boat's crew, and taken on board his yacht after the battle." Lancaster makes the same emphatic declaration from his side, asserting, "Neither I nor any member of my family had any knowledge of, or communication with, Captain Semmes, or any of his officers, or any of his crew. Since the fight I have inquired from my captain whether he, or any of my crew, had had any communication with the captain or crew of the *Alabama* prior to meeting them on the *Deerhound* after the engagement, and his answer given in the most emphatic manner has been, 'None whatever.' As to the deposit of chronometers and other valuable articles, the whole story is a myth."

Mr. Lancaster was wholly neutral and when he was thanked by some of those he had saved he replied: "Gentlemen, you have no need to give me any special thanks. I should have done exactly the same for the other people if they had needed it." Of course as "an English ship is English territory . . . I am unable to discover why I was more

bound to surrender the people of the *Alabama* whom I had on board my yacht, than the owner of a garden on the south coast of England would have been if they had swum to such a place and landed there ; or than the mayor of Southampton was when they were lodged in that city ; or than the British Government is, now that they are somewhere in England."

Of a certainty he was right. The principles of international law established through centuries of usage marked the way for him. It was only the passion of the hour that threw officials off their balance, inflamed the press, and heated the pens of controversialists. An American author of rank on naval history has amusingly and convincingly applied the conditions to an imaginary case, placing the United States in the position of England : "Suppose Ireland should secede from Great Britain, and an Irish cruiser should be sunk in the presence of a Yankee yacht? Would the Yankee yacht owner deliver up the Irishman's crew to the triumphant British war-ship? Certainly, if the Yankee yacht owner was a politician he would not do so." <sup>1</sup>

On another point has there also been a mass of discussion, as to Semmes' obligation to deliver himself to Winslow even though he had set foot on the

<sup>1</sup> Spears, "Hist. Navy," Vol. IV, p. 442.

deck of an English vessel. It was argued that he was a prisoner, and that a sense of honor would have sent him back to his captors. Considering that in the Civil War on both sides, as well as in all wars of history, men have become heroes because they dared even death to escape from prison, this view seems quixotic and ethereal. Besides it is a question whether Semmes was a prisoner at all. He had lowered his flag, it is true, but he contends that this was only an offer to surrender, a confession,—“I am beaten; if you will take possession of me, I will not resist.” But in order that he become a prisoner, he must be, if only for a moment, in the possession of the captor, in his actual, physical possession. If he had swum to the French shore, there would have been no altercation over his case. If the *Kearsarge* had herself been so disabled that she could not have sent after the drowning men, no one would have insisted for an instant that they should have made their way to her or even to the shores across the Atlantic in order to surrender their persons to the victors.

In spite of the plain dictates of the case, a diplomatic discussion went on between Washington and London for some six months, and “a searching inquiry was made by the United States officials in

England and France to learn how far the yacht had been an accomplice of the Confederate cruiser, but no positive evidence was ever found. The correspondence finally ceased with no official concession on either side." However, international opinion seems to be crystallizing against the exercise of such a liberty on the part of a neutral. The United States Navy Department adopted a regulation in 1900 to the effect that a neutral flag, rescuing the wounded or shipwrecked of belligerents, will violate neutrality if it attempts to carry off any it has so succored.<sup>1</sup>

While the debate raged among the participants, and caustic notes of diplomacy passed from capital to capital, sobs of grief and the shouts of exultation resounded on both sides of the ocean over the tragic fate of the *Alabama*.

Two days after the event, the London *Times*, the greatest paper of the day in the English language, and one of the most commanding in existence, in a leader devoted to the famous boat said :

"On Sunday morning, just as all good people were coming down to breakfast, an awful Sunday morning's work was preparing within sight of the British Isles, if among these isles we may include

<sup>1</sup> Ellicott's "Winslow," p. 231.

the barren rock upon which a million has been spent to make it a sentry box to watch the port of Cherbourg. From the latter port, just about nine o'clock, there issued the *Alabama*, the ship that has struck terror into the hearts of the most confident and almost the strongest naval power of the world. More than a hundred times over the very name of the *Alabama*, thundered through a speaking trumpet, has brought down the rival flag as if by magic, and compelled the luckless crew to submit to the inglorious process of examination, surrender, spoliation, and imprisonment, and to see their ship plundered and sent to the bottom. In the shape of chronometers and other valuables the *Alabama* carried the *spolia opima* of a whole mercantile fleet. This time, however, it was not to order a merchantman to lie to while his papers were examined that this scourge of the Federal navy came out of Cherbourg. It is not in our power to say why Captain Semmes, who has gained so much glory and so unquestionable a reputation for courage that he could afford to be prudent, came out with a ship just returned from a long voyage and much in want of repair, to encounter a foe, larger, better manned, better armed, provided with some special contrivances for protection, and quite as likely to be as well handled as his own ship. . . . The captain of the *Kearsarge* had assumed that if they met there could be only one possible result. Why, then, did not Captain Semmes see that this was an occasion for the exercise of that discretion or that ingenuity which the greatest generals have thought rather an addition to their fame? . . . He steamed nine miles out to sea, and entered into mortal combat with the enemy. . . . At the distance of a mile, never less than a quarter of a mile, a formidable



ship, the terror of American commerce, well handled, well armed, well manned, is sent to the bottom in an hour."

Across the water Mr. Welles, the Secretary of the Navy in Washington, in his annual report the following December, raved in childish anger and pitiful prejudice and ignorance. One wonders how the man who would indulge in such abuse and vituperation could sit at the same council table with Lincoln, who breathed in his last annual message the divine spirit of charity. That paper went to Congress the same week that Mr. Welles made the attack upon Semmes :

"Some latent remains of pride, which belongs to the profession, and which animated his earlier and more honorable life while sailing under the American flag, undoubtedly had an influence in inducing the pirate commander to meet a naval antagonist, after his long career of robbery and plunder of unarmed vessels, in the vain hope that it might, if successful, restore to him some portion of the respect which he had forfeited, and at the same time relieve him of some of the debasement he has never ceased to feel, even when applauded by those foreign partisans who hated the country he had deserted. But the same dishonor marked his conduct on this occasion

as during his whole ignoble career. Before leaving Cherbourg he deposited the chronometers and other trophies of his robberies on shore. When beaten and compelled to surrender, he threw overboard the sword that was no longer his own, and abusing the generous confidence of his brave antagonist he stole away in the English tender, whose owner proved himself by his conduct a fit companion for the dishonored and beaten corsair.

“Having surrendered, he cannot relieve himself of his obligations as a prisoner of war until he shall be regularly exchanged. He and each of his surviving officers and crew, whether received upon the *Kearsarge* or the *Deerhound*, are and will be held to be prisoners of war and amenable to the laws which govern civilized communities. A predatory rover may set the laws of nations as well as those of his own country at defiance, but in doing so he must abide the consequences.”

Newspapers work in the glare of public passion, and voice the hot excitement of the moment, but the editors of the great American dailies, writing immediately on receipt of the news the first week in July, show far more poise in their utterances than this official of so elevated a rank that he should have been superior to the fury of the hour. Aside

from the foolish fling at Semmes as a pirate, so universally heard on all sides for three years as to be really excusable in these journals, all their deliverances show a restraint of rejoicing, a moderation of boasting, that are truly admirable.

Without so intending, the *New York Times* places Semmes on a pedestal for skill and daring :

“The pirate *Alabama* has at last gone to the bottom of the sea. After a bloody and lurid career of two years on the high seas—in which career she has passed from one continent to another, from the North and South Atlantic to the Indian Ocean, from the Gulf of Mexico to the China seas, following in the wake of our commercial ships wherever they could be found, and burning and destroying them wherever they were overtaken—she has been annihilated on the very first occasion that one of our ships-of-war was enabled to get an opportunity to measure metal with her.”

The *New York Herald* exhibits a very pardonable pride :

“Our national anniversary has again brought victory with it, and a victory most delightful to the national heart. Captain Winslow, a native of North Carolina, and a citizen of Massachusetts, is the hero of the hour—the happy and gallant man

who has had the good fortune to give the country the intense thrill of patriotic pleasure caused by the announcement of the destruction of the *Alabama*. He has wiped away gloriously a reproach on the name of our navy, and has revived the old pride the people felt in the salt water history of the Stars and Stripes. He has earned nobly every distinction that the government can confer upon him, and he has earned also an honorable place in that brilliant record that tells of the achievements of John Paul Jones, Oliver Hazard Perry, and Stephen Decatur.

“The battle between the *Kearsarge* and the *Alabama* is a very remarkable one in several respects. It is the second battle between wooden steamships, and exemplifies pretty clearly the changes that have been wrought in naval warfare by steam and heavy guns. Both ships were manœvered handsomely under fire, to such an extent that they are said to have described seven complete circles as they neared each other. It was a cool, steady, stand-up fight, in which with no great discrepancy in weight of metal, and accidents aside, the best handled ship was sure to win.”

The stabs at the British in the *Tribune* are gentle enough for that season of fiery patriotism, only two days after the fourth of July :

“Captain Raphael Semmes of Dixie will henceforth have ample leisure for those literary pursuits for which his numerous contributions to the British journals evince so rare an aptitude. His latest effort is a bulletin of the defeat and destruction of his lost ship, in which he contrives to insinuate that Captain Winslow sought to drown him and his fugitive crew—an insinuation emphatically refuted by the published log of the *Deerhound*, by which vessel he was rescued from the ocean and saved from capture. It is hardly possible that Semmes did not see that log, or hear the material fact stated by Mr. Lancaster, his rescuer, so as to know his insinuation was false when he uttered it. He was beaten in fair fight—a fight which he began—and wherein he needed only to be the better seaman and warrior to have achieved success. But burning unarmed merchantmen is a business more congenial to his tastes, and those of his British patrons and crew, than fighting an honest ship-of-war with the Stars and Stripes waving above her and a crew of brave bluejackets at her guns.”

The gratification of a victory over the English, in the *Evening Post*, is mild beside Mr. Welles’ flaming invective :

“The news which we print this morning, that

the *Alabama* has been sunk by the *Kearsarge*, will affect the owners and seamen of our merchant marine with the same feeling of satisfaction that is felt by the little boys at school when a big bully for the first time meets a fellow of his size, and is thoroughly trounced. The *Alabama* has been a kind of sea bully ; she has for more than two years devoted herself to robbing and burning defenseless merchant ships ; her captain constantly and carefully ran away from our men-of-war sent in pursuit of him. To all this we should have little to say, if Semmes had not everywhere boasted of his exploits, and at the same time on every occasion asserted for his ship the character of a man-of-war, and for himself that of a naval officer.

“The *Alabama* was built in Liverpool ; she was manned by English seamen ; a majority of her officers were Englishmen ; her guns were of English make ; her shot and shell were cast in England ; her powder was manufactured in England ; her coal was mined in England and sent out to her in English ships under the English flag. Even the colors she bore were made in England. She had never entered a Confederate port. She had not a single quality of a Confederate man-of-war except this, that her commander was a deserter from the

United States navy. In all else, in every characteristic but this one, she was a British ship.’’

In the South was a strain of grief, tempered with a chivalrous contentment, that Semmes braved all rather than hide behind a neutral barrier. The South was gasping in exhaustion, and not much was printed in the newspapers. Still less has been preserved to the present, but one of the strongest of the journals, the Richmond *Enquirer*, voices in two of its issues, July 7th and 11th, the sadness felt in that section by reason of this defeat abroad when disasters were crowding thick upon those at home. The *Enquirer* says on July 7th: “So the noble *Alabama* sleeps full fathoms five. She has well earned a glorious repose on the bed of old ocean. How many Yankee clippers full of riches has she sent before her? The statistics are not at hand—but the number rises considerably over the hundred. The average pecuniary value of each one of those ships (with their cargoes) was probably greater than the original cost of the *Alabama*; and if the loss to the enemy by the perturbation, interruption, and delay of their commerce is added thereto, it is safe to say that the *Alabama* has paid for herself five hundred times. She could afford to die. There are those who blame Captain Semmes

for going to fight a heavier vessel and a more numerous crew ; a vessel specially prepared with all the naval resources of the United States, expressly to tempt him into a combat where he would be destroyed. He could indeed have remained in harbor, or skulked away without fighting, and long continued to be the terror of Yankee commerce. But not without some disgrace. Such a course would have sunk the warrior in the hangman. It is better as it is. The *Alabama* neither ran away, nor was she taken. She fell by the chance of battle fighting to the last, and not a shadow now dims her glory. Her name is written in the pages of history and not written with water. Her phantom will long trouble the night watch of the Yankee skipper. Even now the enemy does not believe she is verily dead,

“ ‘ But doth suffer a sea change  
Into something rich and strange.’ ”

“ The spirit which gave her life, and the necessities which created her, still exist, and will reproduce the lost rover in some other form, with some other name.”

Four days later, the editor having at hand more details of the tragedy again recurs to the mournful theme :



“We have lost the gallant *Alabama*, but no Federal flag floats in triumph from her masthead. In the caves of the ocean she lies with all but honor lost. Captain Semmes, notwithstanding the fortunes of war have gone against him, will enjoy the approval of his countrymen in accepting the challenge of the Federal captain, and fighting his ship to destruction, rather than run away before the eyes of the world. He fought against the heaviest and greatest odds, a superior ship built for strength and for war, with heavier guns, against a light-built, fast-sailing chaser ; and these odds destroyed his vessel. He fought for the honor of his country’s navy, and though he lost his little ship, yet he saved the honor of his flag. While the country and the world will regret the fate of the *Alabama*, yet all will agree that, having run her course, having fully and effectually served the material interest of her country, her captain was right in making her last fight for the moral effect of illustrating the courage and gallantry of Confederate seamen. Her sacrifice was rightly made ; her former career had been one of triumph, principally over unarmed vessels ; and when challenged before the world even by an enemy far her superior, we rejoice that Captain Semmes determined to fight his enemy rather than, by slip-

ping off in the night, incur the suspicion of cowardice. Ships may be replaced, but honor once tarnished requires far heavier sacrifices than the cost of navies.”

But the *Alabama* lived on, gilding the imagination and enshrined in the fancy. Facile pens constantly revived her exploits and the poets sang of her career. Nearly fifty years after her death, at the centennial celebration of Semmes' birth, in metric measure again her spirit moved over the waters :—

“ What spirit stirs 'neath the sunless keel  
And wakes in her silent shrouds,  
O, hearts of oak, with the grip of steel ?  
Or was it the passing clouds ?

“ She has lain so long by a foreign shore,  
With never a watch on deck,  
With her sunken bells sounding o'er and o'er  
To the dead men in her wreck.

“ And the tides sweep over her mizzenmast  
Through the sails that the channels laved,  
And the seaweed clings to the thing of the past  
Where the stars and bars once waved.

“ But, hearts of oak, with the grip of steel,  
Wherever ye are, what reck ?  
For the spirit of chivalry stirs the keel  
And truth treads the quarter-deck.

- “ Full twenty fathoms below she lies,  
 But she wakes to-night from the dead ;  
 Through her ghastly rigging the night wind plies,  
 Or was it a cloud that sped ?
- “ Yea, come from your graves, ye tars that have shared  
 Her glory, her anguish, her pain !  
 For the mystical moment of time is bared  
 And she sweeps the ocean again !
- “ Nor port, nor harbor, nor home is hers  
 As she breaks from her silent lair ;  
 But the mighty heart of the great South stirs,  
 For the spirit of Semmes is there.
- “ Yea, corsair or viking, pirate or king ?  
 Let history, answering, speak !  
 For out of the years shall her record ring  
 While honor stands at her peak !
- “ The day breaks soon and the night winds sleep  
 And the moon goes down blood-red ;  
 The mists of the years have veiled the deep  
 And shrouded the deathless dead.
- “ For the night is done and the mellowed age  
 Of the past breathes out its tone ;  
 But the truth of history holds its page,  
 Though the sea takes back its own.”<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Virginia Frazer Boyle, in *Confederate Veteran*, Sept., 1909.

## CHAPTER XV

### LATER LIFE AND DEATH

“I CONSIDERED my career upon the high seas closed by the loss of my ship. . . . We had a number of gallant Confederate naval officers, both in England and France, eager and anxious to go afloat, . . . it would have been ungenerous in me to accept another command.”

In accord with this unselfish sentiment which Semmes communicated to his superior, he set out with some English friends on a tour of the Continent to visit other scenes and to restore his health. He was on this pleasure trip only six weeks ; the martial fire burned within him, and he wished to get back to battle for his South, which needed all the help that could be rendered her. Doubtless his scorn of Southern “Carpet Knights,” whom he met in numbers on his jaunt, hastened his steps homeward.

Under the English flag, he made his way to the mouth of the Rio Grande, to the village of Bagdad, from whence he went overland to Matamoras, and

thence across the river to Brownsville, by special coach for part of the way, and onward by the regular conveyances. He soon covered the long, tiresome ride across the state to Shreveport, Louisiana. Fourteen days in all brought him into that place. It was now almost the last of November. His fame preceded him even in the hamlets and at the crossroads. "I was received everywhere with enthusiasm by the warm-hearted brave Texans," he writes, "the hotels being all thrown open to me free of expense, and salutes of artillery greeting my entrance into the towns. I was frequently compelled to make short speeches to the people, merely that they might hear, as they said, how the pirate talked."

At Shreveport, his entry was marked by all the honor of which the harassed and distressed people were capable. Both the civil and military authorities accorded him formal welcome. A journey of some one hundred and fifty miles through mud and swamp put him beside his son, who, like his father, had withdrawn from the United States service and joined the South. From a pupil at West Point at the outbreak of hostilities, he had risen to the grade of major.

Of course Semmes' arrival on American soil soon became known to the Federal forces, and,

judging that he would first aim for his home in Mobile, orders had been issued to watch for him as he tried to cross the Mississippi. As he drew near that barrier, he was very cautious. The path across the lowlands was varied and trying. It led now through groves of magnificent trees, again through tangled thickets with vines which almost dragged the rider from his steed. He forded some waters, swam others, and boated over the widest and deepest streams.

He reached the banks of the Mississippi just before dark, but remained under cover of the forest till the proper moment of safety and "then embarked in a small skiff, sending back the greater part of our escort. Our boat was scarcely able to float the numbers that were packed in her. Her gunwales were no more than six inches above the water's edge." But the night was still, the river smooth, and after a signal of precaution from his conductor, Semmes and the others leaped on shore. The stream was strung with gunboats, Semmes gliding between two, only three miles apart. The man who had so deftly taken the *Sumter* and *Alabama* out of dangerous situations must have laughed to himself to see the efforts now made to entrap him. Once on the eastern side of the river, he rapidly

passed to Mobile, and returned, one of the celebrities of the earth, to the spot that he had left, unknown to fame, not quite four years before.

Without delay he telegraphed his chief in Richmond, and was instructed to come on when he was ready. That was in some five days, and again he set forth on his course. So disorganized was travel that he was two weeks in getting to headquarters. His keen eye pierced all the confusion that he witnessed in this extended trip through the length of the Confederacy. Desolation, poverty, and distress were painful, but far more heart-breaking was the demoralization of the people. "Men, generally, seemed to have given up the cause as lost, and to have set themselves to work, like wreckers, to save as much as possible from the sinking ship. The civilians had betaken themselves to speculation and money getting, and the soldiers to drinking and debauchery."

Semmes was received with great courtesy by Davis and Lee. He gave his observations and impressions as to the state of affairs to Lee, but found that wonderfully poised man fully aware of the gloomy conditions, although utterly powerless to correct them. He was signally honored by both Congress and the Virginia Legislature, being in-

vited to a privileged seat on the floor in each body. Shortly afterward, on the nomination of President Davis, he was unanimously confirmed as Rear-Admiral, and put in command of the James River fleet, consisting of three ironclads and five wooden gunboats.

With the energy and zeal with which he had made the *Sumter* ready for service, he set to work in this larger field, but the odds were all against him. Outside of a few officers, his crews were all landsmen, just as discouraged and discordant as their comrades on shore, being like them scantily clad and on half rations, clamorously applying for leaves of absence, and deserting singly and in squads when their requests were refused. The far more refractory elements on the *Alabama* had been wielded into discipline in a very few weeks, but that was on the high seas, shut in on one ship. In a narrow river, necessitating drills on shore, even Semmes' power of command failed to effect much result.

Semmes considered the circumstances hourly, plotted Sherman's advance nightly alone in his cabin, and visited the Navy Department weekly, being told every time to do what he thought best. Spring came on, nature awakened and grew brighter, but the poor Confederacy sank deeper in depression.



At last on the second of April, on Sunday, so often the eventful day in Semmes' life, as he was sitting at dinner, at four o'clock in the afternoon, he read a despatch that he must destroy his vessels, and march his force to join Lee who was in retreat after the breaking of his lines of defense that morning.

Semmes was an adept at burning ships. He had perhaps fired more than any other man of modern times. But they were all of his enemy. Now they were to be his own. He was just as fearless and thorough and his pen was just as vivid and literary, though excusably briefer, as when it described the leaping, hissing flames of the *Golden Rocket*, afar off down in the Gulf of Mexico, nearly four years before. We detect no shrinking over the inevitable duty as we read: "My little squadron of wooden boats now moved off up the river by the glare of the burning ironclads. They had not proceeded far before an explosion like the shock of an earthquake took place, and the air was filled with missiles. It was the blowing up of the *Virginia*, my late flagship. The spectacle was grand beyond description. Her shell-rooms had been full of loaded shells. The explosion of the magazine threw all these shells, with their fuses lighted, into the air. The fuses were of different lengths, and as the shells exploded by

twos and threes, and by the dozen, the pyrotechnic effect was very fine. The explosion shook the houses in Richmond, and must have waked the echoes of the night for forty miles around." When he got to the city he did not forget to set the torch to his wooden gunboats also.

Disasters could not daunt him. On landing his command of five hundred he was told that there were no trains, that the last one had gone that morning at daylight. But he had to see for himself. He moved his force to the station, there to find a small engine, but "no one in charge of anything and no one knew anything." Semmes was not dismayed, as he had half a dozen engineers among his men. He tore down a fence for fuel, got up steam, made up a train, put his troops aboard and went off till he came to a grade. Here he was stalled, though "the firemen stirred their fires, the engineer turned on all his steam, the engine panted and struggled and screamed."

About this time, when even he was feeling a little blue over his predicament, another engine was found in the workshops. Both were set to the task and off the whole party went in triumph. This incident was amusing to Semmes, after all his desperate experiences at sea. His "railroad cruise ended the

next day," at Danville, after a narrow escape, as Sheridan's cavalry came to the line just an hour and a half after Semmes had passed there. His was the last train to get out of Richmond before its capture.<sup>1</sup>

He remained at Danville ten days, and then took his men, now reduced to less than half, especially after the surrender of Lee, to North Carolina, where he effected a junction with Johnston, remaining with him till he and Sherman made their terms for the dispersion of Johnston's army. Semmes was paroled on the first of May, and at once started for home, getting there the latter part of the same month, to begin the practice of law.

Seven and a half months after, on December 15th, he was arrested by a detail from the United States Marine Corps on an order from the Secretary of the Navy, transferred to Washington, and "was kept a close prisoner, with a sentinel at my door, for nearly four months."

Just as in the retirement of his cabin on board a vessel under his command, Semmes turned to his ever-constant confidant and solace, his diary. He rejoiced that he had learned self-control and patience in the navy, as he would have been ex-

<sup>1</sup> "So. Hist. Soc. Papers," Vol. 21, p. 306.

hausted with the contradictory rumors, the speculations of his counsel, and the delays of the authorities. He went to history and literature for relief, and then started seriously into an investigation of the law of his case. Very early he began shrewdly to suspect that the government was not over-anxious to prosecute him, even though Winslow was brought to Washington and the prosecution was "raking up sailor testimony about the wharves of New York and Boston, and pious New Bedford." He thought such industry should find something to try him upon. He was certain the lawyers knew they could not convict him, yet the Secretary of the Navy would be the winner, as he would accomplish his purpose of wreaking vengeance and inflicting punishment; the long incarceration would satisfy the ends as well as a verdict of guilty. Eventually he saw that his enemies wanted to let him go, but they did not know how to do so and yet justify themselves for having proceeded against him.

In close confinement, unaware of what net might be weaving outside for his entanglement, debarred from his family, with all the circumstances of a nature to make him serious and apprehensive, his sarcasm melts into humor when held up for violation of faith in being rescued by the *Deerhound*: "I

am busy preparing a paper answering the charge of illegal escape, but the demonstration is like an attempt to elucidate an axiom or first principle in mathematics. It is so clear upon its first statement that the demonstration is not only superfluous but does not tend to make the proposition more clear.”

It comes to his knowledge that his acrid antagonist, Secretary Welles, “though very bitter in the beginning, is much modified,” and “speaks respectfully and kindly of me, inquires whether my diet is good and well served, etc., and says he is ready to release me at any time,” and “regrets that I returned to the country ; a good deal of trouble might have been saved if I had not done so.” Outside of his walls other channels were being opened to aid him. Johnston had communicated with Grant, who promised his great influence.

Notwithstanding the efforts of his friends, the expedients of his counsel, and his own sense of innocence, he was in a cage. For decades he had been in the ocean breezes on the deck of a boat, and here he was cut off from fresh air, shut in by four walls. His philosophy bore it all, but it is a fair thing for us to take a glimpse into the recesses of his heart through the entries of one day in his diary :

“The ground is covered with snow this morning to the depth of six or eight inches; wind from the north singing its mournful song by my nailed windows, and there is a leaden sky overhead. The only merry sound that comes to me is the occasional jingling of a sleigh bell.

“Within I have the usual routine of a prison life. This routine I have not yet described.

“My room is in the attic; it is very plainly furnished, but has sufficient for comfort. One of its two windows looks to the east, in the direction of the eastern branch of the Potomac, and of my good old native state of Maryland. The other window gives me a view of the Potomac, in whose waters I used to swim and fish as a boy, and of the distant hills in the direction of Alexandria, of the grand old mother of states and statesmen, now mourning in her desolation, and looking down, as I can fancy, with sad reproach upon her parricidal offspring, the states of her own loins that have betrayed her and destroyed her glorious old doctrines of '76 and '98. In unison with this, her melancholy situation, with the unfinished Washington monument, speaking of the ingratitude of the nation, is seen nearly in the same direction with Lee's mansion and the dome of the Capitol, and from the latter flaunts the flag, the old flag made new by the war, which daily covers in their deliberations the faction of the Rump Congress which daily and hourly proclaims the Southern states to be conquered provinces and refuses admission to their representatives.

“As I pass restlessly to and fro in my narrow quarters, endeavoring to take a little of that treadmill exercise which my inhuman jailers deny me out-of-doors, even in the walled barrack yard of a

military post, I cast alternate glances upon Maryland and Virginia through these two windows, reflect upon the past and speculate upon the future, and such a past and such a future! But a kind Providence interposes His veil between us and the dread events of the unknown future that awaits a people who seem to have abandoned themselves to their passions, regardless of all precepts, moral or divine.

“My routine life, which I had begun to describe when these reflections led me astray, is as follows: I rise in the morning about 8:30, when the drum under my window beats the first call for morning inspection and parade; my attendant in the meantime has made me a fire. I proceed to wash and dress. I have plenty of water, soap, and towels furnished me. I am usually ready for breakfast by a quarter past nine, at which hour my breakfast is brought in. I am supplied by a restaurant in the neighborhood; my meals are satisfactory. I am frequently asked to call for any particular viands that I may desire, but I decline, leaving the selection to the restaurateur. My newspaper is brought in with my breakfast. It is the *National Intelligencer!* But how changed from the days of Clay and Calhoun! I read in it sometimes such a paragraph as this: ‘The trial of Raphael Semmes’ (it does not even call me the late admiral, or the so-called admiral, or the so-called late admiral of the so-called Confederate States), ‘Late Commander of the Rebel Steamer *Alabama*, it is generally believed, will take place very shortly. The full detail for the court has not yet been made, but it is believed that the arrival in this city of Commodore Winslow has something to do with the subject.’

“I do not think I shall be speedily tried. This

would not be in accord with the Bastile system imported from a bygone age and the French Revolution into the latter part of the nineteenth century and the American Revolution. Nor do I think I shall be tried at all, as the government has no case and can make none, though it is even now scouring the 'mappings' of the Northern commercial cities for evidence against the pirate. *N'importe*, I shall be punished. Have already been punished by a close confinement of thirty days, and the ends of justice shall thus be secured.

"But to proceed with my daily routine. My newspaper and breakfast occupy me until eleven o'clock. I then rise and walk about in my room to stretch my cramped limbs and prevent the life current in my veins from actual stagnation. I then sit down and read. I have some law books and histories with me by the thoughtful providence of friends. I have ever found when in trouble that the best remedy is to chain down the imagination in its flights and set the reason at work, at such work that she could not relax her hold of her subject without having it all to do over again, like Sisyphus at his rock. Mathematics and law are such subjects. The mind from the necessity of close application loses itself, becomes absorbed in the subject before it, and thus shuts out the prison walls and makes the prisoner forget his imprisonment. Blessed faculty!

"But sometimes even amid those stern pages loving eyes will intrude, the moist and saddened eyes of loving hearts in our far-off and now disconsolate home! And then the philosopher is overcome, his manhood is about to give way, he throws down his book and again is heard the tramp, tramp, of his narrow cell, as you may have observed, . . . the



ceaseless turnings about of the tiger or the lion in his cage. I thus alternately walk and read, sometimes throwing myself on my sofa in my weariness and heart-sickness, until the lock is heard to grate and turn in my door, and my guard reënters with my dinner, my solitary dinner!

“It is now three o’clock in the afternoon and two-thirds of the weary day has been gotten through with. A day without a word of intelligence from my captors, or their intentions or designs. They are all too busy with the gay world to heed the groans of the prisoner. Let the hated rebel pine and suffer. He struck at the life of this great and glorious nation. Yes, I did strike at its life, but I struck as the surgeon strikes, to save the life of the nation. The patient struggled and was stronger than the surgeon, and now the patient is dead. The government of our fathers has been changed. There are now, says the dominant party, no more state lines; the states are dead and a great consolidated republic has arisen upon the ruins. May God save the life which the South was unable to save, and grant this nation may survive longer than I believe it will.

“The day now wanes, the sun is sinking over the hills of Virginia, the navy yard bell rings, and a stream of working men comes out of the gates and is tramping up the avenue that leads by my prison. These men are all going to their homes, to their fire-sides, to their little ones. Happy working men!

“Night has strewn her shadows over the landscape and darkened my windows and my servant enters with a light. It is dark at 5 : 30 o’clock and I have thus five hours of candle-light before 10 : 30, bedtime, the hour of sweet oblivion! ‘Blessed,’ said the innocent Sancho, ‘is the man who invented

sleep.' You knew not, Sancho, when you uttered these words how much philosophy they embraced. Blessed, thrice blessed, is sleep to the prisoner. It shuts out those soft eyes that looked out at him from between the pages of his book. It quiets his teeming brain and throbbing heart. It withdraws him [from] the contemplation of man's injustice, and in dreams it sometimes even restores him to his far-off home. I have always been a good sleeper, and I sleep soundly. Once or twice in the night I am disturbed by the officer looking in upon me with a lantern to see that I have not yet escaped ! The tramp of the sentinel at my door then lulls me again into forgetfulness. This . . . is one of my days in prison."

Secretary Welles also kept a diary, which has seen the light of day in the last few years. He, too, was frank in his record. He threw open the portals of his heart and he lets any one who cares to read see his squirmings and wriggings. Farther back, during the heat and noise of the war, he was almost pitiable in the torrent of foolish epithets he hurled at Semmes, such as "pirate," "corsair," "buccaneer," and similar terms without an atom of foundation. But our respect rises when we see that he has the strength to show us his weakness. Still better would it have been if he had bluntly written that he was wrong.

His anger had cooled during those seven months

after the Sherman-Johnston convention, and it is a safe judgment that in the secret chambers of his own soul he saw there was no ground for molesting Semmes. But his latent prejudice stirred him, a partisan press prodded him, and he was likely egged on by pedantic politicians like Sumner.

“It is a duty which I could not be justified in evading,” he wrote, “yet I shall acquire no laurels in the movement. But . . . the proceedings against this man will be approved by posterity.”

He got no triumph in his course, and just so surely sober thought could not have endorsed it. He consulted lawyers and publicists, and tried to get the suit made an administrative matter, or at least a combination of the two military departments, through a mixed commission of soldiers and sailors. He wanted to drop all counts of treason, piracy, or offenses amenable in civil courts, and rely on an indictment of Semmes for violation of the laws of war in escaping on the *Deerhound*. Even here, referring to Semmes, Welles could only “suppose he was guilty of violating the usages and laws of war,” and further he confessed that on examination “the points had been narrowed and mitigated so that his offense was really less aggravated than had been

charged and believed." Of course President Johnson procrastinated, conferred with other officials, called for a list of members for a military commission, promised to sign the commission, then decided he would have no more of such bodies, then found out that the courts were not acting in matters of treason or piracy, then wanted to parole Semmes. Welles by this time was abashed at the unjust, arbitrary treatment of Semmes, and saw clearly that, as the President would not have a commission and as the courts would not act for treason, there was nothing to do but to release Semmes unconditionally, as far as the executive branch was concerned.

As nothing could be done administratively, the endeavor was made judicially, a drag net of law having been cast out to catch Semmes in some of its meshes. The solicitor of the Navy Department, J. A. Bolles, was making most prodigious efforts to frame a case against him. To the layman, drinking in the opinions of the street, the halter was already around Semmes' neck. The wildest, most savage animosity had raged against him since he had begun his exploits on the *Sumter*, not confined to reckless editors or thoughtless partisans.

So distinguished a man as Edward Everett had

bitterly denounced Semmes as a pirate, even after the *Alabama's* crew had been treated as prisoners of war. This was perhaps to be condoned in an orator and rhetorician, but Secretary Welles, blindly fatuous as to all law and logic, in one and the same report had stigmatized Semmes as a "corsair" and a "pirate" and then recognized him as a "prisoner of war" entitled to exchange.

It was the whip and spur of this unreasoning hatred that drove the lawyer to his disagreeable task, as it had been guaranteed Semmes at his surrender that he was not to be disturbed for any acts of war anterior to that time. But this phrase could be twisted, and the attorneys did so at once. They argued that it did not debar prosecutions for violations of the laws of war. The issue was made upon that ground.

The question arose : What were Semmes' violations of the laws of war, and what was the evidence ? Five lines of inquiry were carried on : Was it wrong to destroy ships instead of taking them into port ? Had he been cruel to his captives ? Was he justifiable in hoisting false flags to deceive his enemy ? Was it an offense to capture United States vessels in neutral waters ? Had he been perfidious in the fight with the *Kearsarge* ?

The putting of these queries in ordinary language shows the flimsiness of the case against Semmes, and it is to the credit of the solicitor that he unqualifiedly dropped four of the counts, and posterity has just as entirely dropped the fifth one. If Solicitor Bolles had not been carried away by the passion of the hour, he himself would just as quickly have discarded that one also.

A little cool reflection soon showed that three of the positions were hopelessly untenable. Captures in neutral waters were matters for the neutral powers themselves to consider. Fooling the enemy with foreign flags, and burning prizes on the high seas, had been too often practiced successfully by American sailors in wars with England for this country to raise a point on them against Semmes. He had done only what Americans had proudly done times without number, and might want to do again, and it would not do now finally to debar themselves from the use of such devices.

As to cruelty toward prisoners, Mr. Bolles proceeded in a comprehensive, well-balanced manner. The very air was rife with charges against Semmes that he had been guilty of the oppression of his captives, and hundreds of rumors came from all quarters. Bolles caught up all he could, advertised

for more, and then fearlessly and impartially sifted the evidence. At the start it looked black for Semmes, especially with regard to the *Solferino* and the *Amazonian*.

The consul at Queenstown, Ireland, in 1866, had transmitted to his superior the information that some of the *Alabama's* crew had declared that Semmes had fallen in with a vessel of the build of the *Solferino*, had fired into her, and had sunk her with all on board, even though she had immediately on being hailed surrendered without any resistance whatever. But one of the *Alabama's* crew was brought over from England. He denied it all, and fully established the fact that she could never have been nearer than five hundred miles to the *Solferino*, which had undoubtedly foundered at sea.

The accusations of harsh treatment of some of the crew of the *Amazonian* were seen to be just as groundless. It was alleged that one man was handled so roughly and starved so barbarously that he died on the *Alabama*, all because he had resisted the lowering of his ship's flag when he was ordered to do so. It was learned from the captain of the burnt boat that nothing of this kind had occurred, that all had been cared for "as well as they could expect," that all had been set ashore at a foreign

port, that the person in question had found passage home on board a neutral, and that he had died on the voyage from sickness, not from violence or rough treatment.

Two other cases were investigated, and both turned out to be just as baseless. Bolles closed this chapter of "slandorous rumors and idle gossip" by the judicial conclusion that "in not one solitary instance was there furnished a particle of proof that . . . Semmes . . . had ever maltreated his captives."

Nothing was left but the question of Semmes' conduct in the last fight of the *Alabama*. The five counts against him had dwindled to one, and still better would it have been had they dwindled to none. When arrested, Semmes was charged with triple perfidy; he had begun firing again after having shown a white flag, had broken faith in escaping, and had reëntered the "rebel service" without having been exchanged.

At this distance from the raging tumult of the day, it is hard to see how a man of Bolles's judicial experience could have had any patience with such childish clamor, but he was calm, and exhaustively followed out all three lines to the end. He went through all of Winslow's official despatches and



found no complaint against Semmes until thirty-seven days after the battle. Winslow gave no hint of such charge either in the report on the day of the conflict or in that of the next day; in fact he had charged nothing of the sort at all until he had seen Semmes' accusation that the *Kearsarge* fired on the *Alabama* after the flag had come down. And yet "this dilatory complaint was the basis of the charge on which Semmes was ultimately arrested."

Seven of the *Kearsarge* officers, including the captain, were called to Washington and examined as to the *Alabama's* beginning to fire after she had surrendered. They were so at variance in their statements that it was folly to attempt a suit on their evidence.

By this time all were weary and ashamed of the matter and felt that it was best to release Semmes, since the trial could take on only the form of partisan persecution. Dozens of witnesses had been examined, hundreds of letters had been written, numerous advertisements for proof had appeared, the Atlantic seaports had been raked over, the uttermost corners of the earth had been invited to offer evidence of guilt, and nothing against Semmes' conduct or character had been found. He remained unscorched in this baptism of legal fire. Neverthe-

less, it was Bolles's deliberate belief that had he been tried immediately on his arrest, he would have been convicted and hanged.<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps Semmes' own exertions had as much to do with his regaining his liberty as the briefs of counsel or the pleadings of friends. He had not been behind the bars a month before he sent a keen, clear-cut argument to President Johnson, proving how illegal and unconstitutional his arrest and imprisonment were. He took his stand on a few profound principles, strongly expounded.

He reasoned that his parole, based on the terms of the surrender by General Johnston, guaranteed him against all molestation for "any act of war committed anterior to the date of that convention." Of course, he granted, he could be held for transgressions that were not acts of war,—forgery for instance;—but classifying all possible acts of war, a violation of the laws of war would fall under the head of acts of war, and under the terms of his discharge he could not be held liable for such act. His escape on the *Deerhound* was either in consonance with the laws of war or was in defiance of them, but in either case it was an act of war, and of course he was not legally accountable for it, since the conven-

<sup>1</sup> *Atlantic Monthly*, Vol. 30, July, Aug., 1872.

tion between Sherman and Johnston was an "obliv-  
ion of all acts of war of whatever nature."

Neither, during the war nor after the war, could he be tried for treason, as the Constitution of the United States "declares in words that treason against the United States shall consist only in levying war against them, or in adhering to their enemies, giving them aid and comfort,—all of which adherence, giving of aid and comfort, etc., are equally acts of war."

The Attorney General had argued that Semmes could be tried after the close of the war by the civil tribunals, since the military convention would then expire, just as a parole ceases in such circumstances, and of course such person could be haled before the courts for previous offenses. He confused two terms, asserted Semmes, because the instrument of his surrender expressly provides that he is "not to be disturbed" so long as he observes the agreement, not alone during war time, but for all time whether in peace or not; and he is "not to be disturbed" by any branch of the United States government.

Semmes had been seized for an act committed ten months before the surrender in North Carolina, widely known over the entire land, indeed over the world, and therefore certainly to the "Federal

Government.” “If,” says Semmes, “that authority then entertained the design, which it has since developed, of arresting and trying me for this alleged breach of the laws of war, was it not its duty, both to itself and to me, to have made me an exception to any military terms it might have been disposed to grant to our armies? I put it to you, Mr. President, . . . whether it was consistent with honor and fair dealing for the government first to entrap me, by means of a military convention, and then, having me in its power, to arrest me and declare the convention null and void.”

He eloquently besought the President not to tarnish the pages of that history which he was making and of which “my record and that of the gallant South” were a part, by any deed of perfidy. The “passions of men, North and South, were tossed into a whirlwind by the current events of the most bloody and terrific war that the human race had ever seen,” but “I shall hope to justify and defend myself against any and all charges affecting the honor and reputation of a man and a soldier. Whatever else may be said of me, I have at least brought no discredit upon the American name and character.”

Through his own burning words, through the col-

lapse of the legal case against him, through the cooling of Welles's fury, through the softening of the hearts of politicians, through the spreading spirit of forgiveness for the past, through the complications of politics, or through a combination of all these influences, happily for the American memory, the record was saved from the stain of Semmes' blood by his release in the spring.<sup>1</sup>

The mighty captain in Washington had not trod the quarter-deck for the past twelvemonth, and his ward-room reeked with feverish forebodings, frantic fears, and the futile frothings of anger, but time mellowed the hearts and kind fate guided the destiny of the nation. The victors kept their pledges, with one or two bare exceptions. Semmes was allowed his freedom, and he turned his back forever on that awful drama of pain and death in which he had played so signal and so worthy a part.

His career of arms was over, but his fame went to

<sup>1</sup> On April 6, 1866, Secretary Welles officially addressed President Johnson, that "In view of the recent decision of the U. S. Supreme Court in the Indiana military commission cases, and of the present condition of affairs, it is respectfully advised that Raphael Semmes, unless you shall deem it proper to have him tried forthwith, be unconditionally discharged from custody under his present arrest, and that he be remitted to his original written parole." Johnson endorsed on this, "The recommendation of the Secretary of the Navy is approved, let the prisoner be released from custody."—No. 7 of Vol. II, "Executive Letters, April, June, 1866," Navy Dept. Archives.

the uttermost bounds of the earth. His wondrous adventures have been weighed and remarked by the eminent of the world, one of the most notable instances being the war lord of to-day, the Emperor of Germany, who observed to an American consul: "I reverence the name of Semmes. In my opinion he was the greatest admiral of the nineteenth century. At every conference with my admirals, I counsel them to closely read and study Semmes' 'Memoirs of Service Afloat.' I myself feel constant delight in reading and rereading the mighty career of the wonderful Stormy Petrel." <sup>1</sup>

Semmes wended his way again to Mobile, and was soon elected probate judge of Mobile county, but was not allowed by the Federal authorities to serve. He was also cut off from legal practice by the test oath demanded of former military men. In the autumn of 1866 came to him an appointment on the academic staff of the Louisiana State Seminary, at Alexandria, to teach moral philosophy and English literature, at a salary of \$3,000 per annum.

Seven years before, the head of this institution, which was afterward removed to Baton Rouge and

<sup>1</sup> "So. Hist. Soc. Papers," Vol. 38, p. 24, 1910. Uttered in 1894 to Frederick Opp who certifies as to correctness in private letter of Aug. 26, 1912.

eventually there developed into the present State University, was W. T. Sherman, who resigned to go North and offer his services to the government of the United States, and who finally became the famous general that captured Atlanta and marched to the sea at Savannah.

There was such desire to obtain Semmes that the superintendent offered to vacate his post and be demoted, so that the admiral could be put in control, but the board in charge deemed it best not to do this.

With his knowledge of law and philosophy, with his taste for literature, with his wide experience of men and life, and with his trained intellect, it was a matter of course that he would be well fitted for his new duties, and that he should be successful in this strange field. "His work at the seminary was with the junior and senior classes," with the usual textbooks of the time, in metaphysics, ethics, criticism, logic, rhetoric and Christian evidences. "Not much is known of his method of teaching, except that for the most part he lectured to the students, quizzing but little. In daily life at the seminary and in his intercourse with the faculty and students, he was quiet and dignified, of easy manners and rather retiring disposition. Of his unique naval career,

about which all wished to hear, he would say but little." He had left his family in Alabama, and boarded with one of the professors.

But political storms were brewing. The throes and woes of reconstruction were upon the hapless people. Denunciation poured forth upon a corps of teachers consisting of "rebel officers just from the Confederacy" and a body of students mainly "late Confederate soldiers and sons of rebel planters." Semmes was too keen a judge not to scent trouble ahead from these radical assaults. Besides, he felt a little out of place, as he was so much older than his colleagues, none of whom was over thirty. In addition he was offered the editorship of the *Memphis Bulletin*. He got leave of absence in 1867, went to Memphis, and in June of that year sent in his resignation.<sup>1</sup>

In savage vindictiveness, President Johnson pursued him, and "caused a controlling interest [in the paper] to be purchased by partisans who ousted the admiral from the position." Semmes took up lecturing on his thrilling career on the *Sumter* and *Alabama*, toured the South, and netted about a thousand dollars per month, which, considering the

<sup>1</sup>The best sketch of his last years is the article by Prof. W. L. Fleming, in *N. O. Picayune*, May 14, 1911.



circumstances of his audience, was princely compensation. Still he preferred the instructor's chair, as "I would much rather be lecturing to a class of young men than to a promiscuous multitude." He applied for the place of superintendent of the institution he had withdrawn from upon misinformation of the death of the incumbent, but he was only too glad to drop his scheme on learning that his friend was yet alive. An effort was made to induce him to become a teacher again, but the salary offered was not enough to tempt him from the path of lecturing and law. He lived quietly in Mobile, practicing his profession, writing his memoirs, diversifying the routine of life by trips to Confederate reunions and visits to friends.

A very delightful recreation of the sort was a short time spent with his efficient executive officer, Kell, in the home of the latter on his farm in Georgia. Kell had named his son "for the admiral, his dear name being associated with my last dream of glory," as Kell states it. The two officers talked over the stirring life they had lived on the ocean, and Kell records with deep gratitude that Semmes declared that he (Kell) had been his right hand. "That he should have been satisfied that I had done my duty," Kell writes, "was very dear

praise to me, and I record it not from vainglorious pride but from the desire that my posterity may know that I did my duty."

Semmes' days moved on in tranquillity in his home in Mobile until the end, on August 30, 1877. His illness was brief and comparatively painless. He died as he had lived, devoutly in the faith of the Catholic Church, and it was with her rites he was buried in Mobile. Civic and military honors were paid to his memory.

Nearly a quarter of a century afterward, on June 27, 1900, a bronze statue of him was unveiled in Mobile, one of those Gulf storms that he had so often faced coming on during the proceedings with the same suddenness with which he used to burst upon the unsuspecting merchantmen in that inland sea. Nine years later, on the centennial of his birth, the land for which he had boldly skirted the wave for nearly four years, in defiance of a great naval nation, proudly recalled his daring services.

## CHAPTER XVI

### THE "ALABAMA" CLAIMS—A SEQUEL

THE *Alabama* ceased her destructiveness on June 19, 1864 ; the results of her work were still in course of legal dispute and settlement in Washington at least a third of a century later. In the meantime endless speeches and discussions had been heard, volumes of reports, despatches, and decisions had been published, and a great forward step had been taken in international relations. The two great branches of the English race had nearly come to blows, and had then set a fine example to the world of the peaceful solution of vexatious and harassing questions by arbitration instead of by war.

Friction had arisen between England and America over the meaning and interpretation of neutral rights and duties. Both powers were thoroughly committed by their own acts to the principles of non-interference in contests between belligerents. Before the end of the eighteenth century, in 1794,

this young republic, only half a decade old, had signed a treaty with her mother to make pecuniary indemnity for failure to perform her duties of neutrality, and under this stipulation she had paid out nearly one hundred and fifty thousand dollars.<sup>1</sup>

She had followed up this adherence to her doctrines by passing an act not quite a quarter of a century later prohibiting her citizens from giving military aid to any country in a contest. England had done the same through parliamentary measures. It was upon the solid ground thus provided by both that the United States took her stand in asking compensation for the damages inflicted by the *Alabama* and other cruisers. Because of her preëminence in the warfare on American commerce, and because of the strong evidence against England in her case, she has been made sponsor for all the others, and her name has been given to the entire matter. All are spoken of as the "*Alabama* claims."

Another cruiser, the *Florida*, preceded the *Alabama* in escaping to the high seas, and almost equaled her in the extent of the damage she inflicted, but English remissness was not so flagrant, nor was her career so extensive, so prolonged, and so world-renowned. American feeling was excited by her

<sup>1</sup> J. B. Moore, "Digest of Int. Law," Vol. VI, p. 999.

case ; it was inflamed by the *Alabama* coming close upon the heels of it.

Both of them were sharp incitements to the rising tide of indignation in the North against England for the undoubted sympathy of her ruling class with the South. The utterances of some public men, the editorials in some papers, notably the *Times*, were highly exasperating to American pride. But when the Queen's proclamation of neutrality was issued, on May 13, 1861, a virtual recognition of belligerency, bitter and angry words beat the air on the other side of the ocean, and the seeds were sown that were to ripen into the demand for reparation immediately the home dissensions were stilled enough for attention to be given to the matter. The foundations for this action, however, were laid at the time firm and deep, by the vigilance and foresight of the American minister in London, the coldly intellectual Charles Francis Adams.

He it was who, after the tumult had subsided in America, took up the negotiations for a day of reckoning with the Briton. But both he and his chief, W. H. Seward, were fairly obsessed with what they thought the frightful wrong and awful consequences of the Queen's proclamation of neutrality. They asserted that this was premature and in defiance

of international comity, an utterly indefensible position, as, of course, each nation must be its own judge of the proper time for such a step.

Adams was superseded by Reverdy Johnson, who simply ignored this preposterous contention and succeeded in getting a treaty from England providing for arbitration in the settlement of individual claims for losses, but having nothing to do with the foolish dispute over unfriendly haste in issuing the proclamation, and nothing specific about the national aspects of the operations of the cruisers that the Confederates had got in England. Charles Sumner, chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Senate, in a speech as wrong as it was long, as absurd as it was grandiose, denounced the agreement as near an insult to the dignity and rights of this nation, and secured its rejection by a vote virtually unanimous. He was so fanatical as to attribute the vastness and prolongation of the Civil War to that piece of paper with the Queen's signature at the bottom of it put before the public in a foreign realm three thousand miles away. To him that little flourish of the pen was responsible not only for the destruction of commerce on the seas, but for at least half of the huge expense of the entire conflict both on land and water, and for staggering losses of the

growth in wealth we might have enjoyed otherwise. He modestly put the money liability of England at twenty-five hundred million dollars. Sumner's figures became really humorous when a great English leader adopting Sumner's method made out England liable for over seventy-five hundred million dollars—a *reductio ad absurdum* that effectually answered Sumner. But Sumner's address, although bereft of reason and common sense, was given an official endorsement through its publication by special order of the Senate, such action being necessary, since it was spoken in secret session. Standing thus as the view of the government of the United States, it blocked the path of diplomacy, as no Englishman with an atom of self-respect, could for a second entertain such propositions.

But trade between the two countries grew, intercourse between the peoples increased, sensitiveness faded, and friendliness mounted higher,—above all, America ignored Sumner's monstrous anglophobia, dropped all foolish thought of indirect or consequential damages, and settled down to sensible claims of compensation for the depredations of the cruisers.

On the other hand, England also lost something of her lofty attitude. At first, during the war, Eng-

lish official tone was aloof, then cool, then contemptuous. The Foreign Secretary bluntly declared that the claims were not "founded on any grounds of law or justice." But his successors were more open to argument. Two grave circumstances helped to hasten their change of heart ; the rapid success of Germany in the war with France in 1870, and President Grant's message in December of the same year urging that the United States government itself take over the private claims against England. Germany dominating on the continent might shade England's prestige, and humble her pride. In case of conflict, England might need friends across the Atlantic. Grant's veiled threat precluded all hope of sympathy, unless a better understanding could be reached. With both sides inclined to the same end, a juncture was soon effected, and the Treaty of Washington was ratified in the spring of 1871.

It provided for the arbitration of all the claims growing out of the Civil War against England under three rules of neutrality that were incorporated in the document. These three principles stipulated that a neutral government must not permit cruising operations to start from its limits against any power with which it is at peace, that it must not allow any of its territory to be used as a base of movements



against either belligerent, and that it must "exercise due diligence" to discharge these "foregoing obligations and duties."<sup>1</sup>

A tribunal of arbitration was enjoined in the first article, which refers to "the *Alabama* and other vessels," mentioning by name the *Alabama* only. Under the terms of the treaty the United States, England, Italy, Switzerland, and Brazil appointed, each, a member of a court that met at Geneva with every prospect that it would almost immediately dissolve, and the whole scheme fail, over the vexatious question of indirect claims. Happily, America had wise men among her counselors, and they dropped all notions of anything of the sort. The Tribunal itself eliminated all the cruisers from consideration except the *Florida*, *Alabama*, and *Shenandoah*, exonerating England from any blame for the others. The vote affirming England's responsibility was unanimous on the *Alabama* alone. In her case the evidence was so clear and strong that even her own representative, who all through the proceedings had fought so persistently for his side of the case, declared that his government was properly liable for damages. The final decision of the Tribunal was

<sup>1</sup> Art. 6 of Treaty of Washington, p. 550 of Vol. I of Moore's "International Arbitration."

that England should pay to the United States the lump sum of \$15,500,000.

The essentials of the testimony as to the *Alabama* show :

“That the attention of the British Government was called to the suspicious character of the vessel on the 23d of June ; that her adaptation to warlike use was admitted ; that her readiness for sea was known ; that evidence was submitted on the 21st, the 23d, and finally on the 25th of July that put her character beyond a doubt ; and that in spite of all this, she was allowed to sail on the 29th.”

These facts formed the real foundation of the case against Great Britain.<sup>1</sup>

A part of the data submitted by the American side was an extract from a speech by Cobden in the House of Commons in 1864. He gave most striking statistics of the ruinous effects of the cruises of the *Alabama* and her sister ships on the American carrying trade. He declared that “in 1860 two-thirds of the commerce of New York was carried on in American bottoms ; in 1863 three-fourths was carried on in foreign bottoms.” England profited directly by this change as the ships were transferred to the British flag and to British capitalists. The

<sup>1</sup>Soley, “Blockade and Cruisers,” p. 191.

figures demonstrate that there were transferred to England, in 1860, 41 vessels with a tonnage of 13,638 ; in 1861, 126 vessels, tonnage of 71,673 ; in 1862, 135 vessels, tonnage of 64,578 ; in 1863, 348 vessels, tonnage of 252,579 ; in 1864, 106 vessels, tonnage of 92,052.<sup>1</sup>

Another speaker, the president of the English Board of Trade, about the same time, asserted that British shipping had grown from a total tonnage of about seven million to something like fourteen million.

The American Government constituted a Claims Court to apportion the award among the various applicants who were scattered the wide world over. Commissions were sent to various points to take depositions and make examinations. The matter dragged its tedious length for years, but nearly half of the total indemnity, or almost seven million dollars, was assigned to the sufferers from the *Alabama*, a wonderful testimonial to the destructive skill and energy of Raphael Semmes.

<sup>1</sup> "Case of the United States," p. 474.

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