

## THE SAUCY BLOCKADE RUNNER

One beautiful afternoon in the summer of 1863, the steamship Ad-Vance, the famous blockade runner belonging to the State of North Carolina, with a cargo of cloth, blankets, shoes and other supplies for the North Carolina State troops in the Confederate Army, steamed out of the port of St. George's, Bermuda. Her graceful bow headed for the port of Wilmington, North Carolina, which was at that time closely guarded by a blockading squadron composed of the fleetest gunboats in the Federal Navy, to prevent the very purpose we had in view, that of taking in supplies for the Confederate Army. I, a lad of nineteen years of age, was serving as signal officer on the ship.

We had a smooth run of two days and three nights, always keeping a sharp lookout for Federal cruisers which were kept in these waters to intercept any vessel suspected of contraband traffic. Since our ship was not permitted to carry an armament of any kind, our safety depended upon our vigilance and the speed of our ship. To be on the safe side, we would avoid any vessel carrying steam since the smoke was visible before its rigging loomed in sight.

As usual, on the afternoon of the second day all hands were called up and told off by the First Officer to their respective boats. It was the purpose of our Captain, Thomas Crossan, if about to be captured, to scuttle the ship and by means of the ship's boats to endeavor to make our way to shore. What a motley sight our crew presented! With the exception of our Sailing Master, our officers were Southerners, but the crew was

composed of men of every nationality, adventurers attracted to this most dangerous service by the Tempting offer to enormous bounties and wages paid in gold or silver.

On account of my youthfulness I was much petted by the officers, especially by the Sailing Master, who was a bluff typical Scotsman, Heaven bless him! Though by no means of exemplary habits himself, he watched over and guarded me against the temptations to which I was exposed, as carefully as a father could have done. He always assigned me to his boat; but Kit Morse, our Wilmington pilot, and counted the most skillful pilot and surfman on our coast, would always whisper to me, "Never mind, Smith, if ever we do have to take to the small boats, you just step into my boat, take a seat by Kit Morse and if any boat can live throughout the surf, I will land you safe on North Carolina grit." This invariably placed me in a quandary in which obedience to orders and personal safety struggled for mastery.

It was the intention of our Captain to make the coast of North Carolina at some point about twenty-five miles above Fort Fisher at New Inlet to the Cape Fear River, then to steam down the coast and run in about three A.M. which would be flood tide on the bar (our ship being so deeply laden, we could not get over the bar except at high water). Owing to our having run off our course to dodge steamers, we made Hatteras light about one A.M. and although we steamed down the coast under full head of steam, daylight found us some twenty-five miles above Fort Fisher, and brought to view the Federal blockading fleet of five vessels stretching in a line abreast of Masenboro Sound and standing off about three miles at sea. The closest scrutiny with the aid of our glasses failed to show any sign of life on their decks. However, we knew they always kept up full head of steam. The Captain called Mr. Morse, the pilot, Mr. Morrison, the Chief

Engineer, and me to him and said, "We have either to run off the coast with the chance of a long chase from those fellows out there", pointing to the Federal vessels, "and try to get in tonight, or, under Cover of the fog and smoke from the surf and salt works, hanging over the coast line, try to slip by them." Then, after a minute's pause he said with a sparkle in his blue eyes and with compressed lips, "I am going to take the risk of running by them. Mr. Morrison, be ready to give her all the steam possible. Smith, stand by to signal Col. Lamb to man his guns to protect us. Pilot, take the ship, put her in if possible, if not, beach her."

An extra hand was sent to the wheel. As I with my signal flag in hand, took my position on the starboard side of the quarter deck to the right of the pilot, he said, "Smith, old boy, we are in for it." We steamed on at a moderate speed, hugging the shore line as closely as possible to keep under cover of the mingled fog and smoke which stretched like a veil along the coast.

Scanning intently the line of blockaders, I began to flatter myself that we were unobserved. When we were off Masenboro and abreast of the line of blockaders, up went a signal from the flagship of the squadron and in a moment each vessel slipped her cable and was in motion under full steam. One steamed inshore to our rear, three came obliquely on our port beam, and one, the Connecticut, the fleetest of the squadron, steamed to head us off. We saw that we were in a trap that had been set for us. "Full speed ahead." The pilot signaled the Engineer, and the bonny ship bounded forward like a racer. "Up with the colors" ordered the Captain, and the Southern Cross fluttered in the morning breeze from our flagstaff astern.

Intense excitement prevailed among the sailors and firemen off duty as they gathered on the forward deck. Among them was our chief cook, "Frenchie", who was want to boast a cap carried off his head by a Russian bullet at Sebastopol.

"Smith", said the pilot, "twenty miles to Fort Fisher." A puff of smoke and a cannon ball from the Connecticut skipped the crest of the waves to the forward but short our ship. I recognized it as a gentle hint to round to and to surrender. The motley crowd on the deck, supposing it to be the extent of the Connecticut's ability to coerce gave vent to their feelings in a suppressed cheer. Alas for the hope!-the last spark of which was soon quenched. The Connecticut, since we did not change our course, sent the next shot whistling between our smokestacks and across the three mile strip of land into the Cape Fear River, as I afterwards learned. "Oh Good God!" cried Frenchie as he darted for shelter towards the forecastle, but was intercepted by a shot across our bow. The firing from the fleet had now become general and amid the whistle of shot and bursting of shells all about us, the pilot said with a smile, "Smith, look at Frenchie dodging about like a partridge in a coop."

At that moment the signal station highest up the beach hove in sight. My time for action had arrived which required me to become oblivious to the terrors menacing destruction and death, and by waves of my signal flag to spell out, letter by letter, this message to Col. Lamb, Commandant of Fort Fisher, "Col. Lamb: Have guns manned to protect us. Signed, Crossan, Capt. Ad-Vance." No one can imagine how glad I was to catch at the close of my message, the shore operator's reply of "O.K." My official responsibility now being ended, the peril that environed us now burst upon me with full force. Fifteen miles to Fort Fisher! For fifteen miles we were to be subjected to such an

ordeal, or that of being dashed to pieces in that fearful surf which mingled its ominous warning with the reverberating roar of the pitiless cannon. I tried to read my destiny in the imperturbable countenance of my companion, of whom a wave of the hand could consign me to a Northern prison or perchance to a watery grave. I might as well seek to penetrate the secrets of the Sphinx as the thoughts of Kit Morse. Yet I knew he loved me and thought of my safety even with this great responsibility resting upon him, for once, as fragments of shell were falling all about us, he pushed me under the lee of the Sailing Master's Cabin saying, "Smith, that may keep a piece from striking you." How slowly we seemed to be running! People ashore likened our speed to that of a bird seeking safety by flight. Minutes seemed like hours to us, yet slowly, so slowly as scarcely to be perceptible, we were gradually forging ahead of all except the fleet-footed Connecticut which was running in a straight line for the inlet, to cut us off while we had to follow the curves of the shoreline. On sped the chase. In the press for speed the Connecticut fired only from her starboard guns.

We had now reached the last curve of the shore which projected out seaward and which would have to be turned before we could enter the inlet. This the pilot traced with his finger and said calmly, "Smith, that will bring us within a hundred yards of the Connecticut. I wonder why Lamb doesn't fire?"

Bang! Went a gun from the shore battery, and a Whitworth shell bored through the hull of the rear vessel which was in point blank range. Suddenly the vessels to the rear gave up the chase and steamed seaward. Not so with that dreaded Connecticut which seemed right across our bow with our ship as a shield to protect her from the guns of the Fort.

How fast we were approaching her! Every motion of her gun crew became plainly visible to our naked eye, even that of the gunner as he pulled the lanyard and sent the fearful missile of destruction aimed at our water line, but buried in a wave twenty feet short. "That got us" said the bravo pilot. Then, with a quick wave of his hand and a cheery voice of command, "Over, hard over," the wheel rolled under the willing hands of the brave steersman; and with the speed of a chased stag and the grace of a swan the bonnie craft rounded the point and entered the inlet. The guns of Fort Fisher belched flames of fire and we were safe.

"Safe! Thank God!" burst from a hundred lips. Even a cheer went up from the deck of the intrepid Connecticut as she headed out to sea. A tribute, as we afterwards learned from a New York paper, was given from her brave crew to the daring act of "The Saucy Blockade Runner" as they designated us.

Col. Lamb signaled off to know the extent of our damages. I replied, "None visible." He at once pulled off and as he greeted me with a hearty shake of the hand, said, "Smith, I knew you to be a truthful boy, but could not believe it possible for any vessel to be subjected to such a fire as that and not be badly damaged."

Upon careful inspection, the only damage to our good ship was found to be a dent made by a fragment of shell striking one of our smokestacks. The general opinion seemed to be that we owed our deliverance to the heavy swell prevailing at sea. The sailor boy thought of his Mother's prayers.

J.B. Smith

Rosedale Farm, Guilford College, North Carolina, July 25, 1895

NOTE: This sketch would not be complete did I not add that it was on Sunday when this incident occurred, and after the morning duties were performed, the Captain had all hands called up on deck, where with bared heads and profound reverence we listened to the most impressive sermon I ever heard. It was from the lips of Dr. Moses D. Hoge of Richmond, VA. (the great war chaplain of the Confederacy), who had been to England to procure Bible and Testaments for the Southern Soldiers and had taken passage on the Ad-Vance. A special reward had been offered by the Federal authorities for the capture of Dr. Hoge.