

REMINISCENCES OF FORTS SUMTER AND MOULTRIE

IN 1860-'61.

CHAPTER I.

FORT MOULTRIE IN 1860.

The Garrison of Fort Moultrie.—Early Indications of Secession.—Situation of the Fort.—Edmund Ruffin and Hobert Barnwell Rhett. —The Secretary of War.—Arms sent to the South.—Colonel Gardner.—Captain Foster ordered to Charleston harbor.—The Officers at Fort Moultrie.—Communications with Northern Men by Cipher.—Proscription of Antislavery Men in Charleston.—Position of Charleston Merchants.—The Secession Leaders only prepared to resist Coercion.—The Mob proves unmanageable.—General Scott's Letter to the President, October 29.—The Situation in November. —No Instructions from Washington.—Colonel Gardner's Report to General Wool.

The summer of 1860 found me stationed at the headquarters of the First United States Artillery at Fort Moultrie, South Carolina. I was captain of Company E, and second in command to Brevet Colonel John L. Gardner, who was lieutenant-colonel of the regiment. The regimental band and Captain Truman Seymour's company (H) also formed part of the garrison. The other forts were unoccupied, except by the ordnance-sergeants in charge.

Charleston, at this period, was far from being a pleasant place for a loyal man. Almost every public assemblage was tinctured with treasonable sentiments, and toasts against the flag were always warmly applauded. As early as July there was much talk of secession, accompanied with constant drilling, and threats of taking the forts as soon as a separation should occur.

To the South Carolinians Fort Moultrie was almost a sacred spot, endeared by many precious historical associations; for the ancestors of most of the principal families had fought there in the Revolutionary War behind their hastily improvised ramparts of palmetto logs, and had gained a glorious victory over the British fleet in its first attempt to enter the harbor and capture the city.

The modern fort had been built nearly on the site of the ancient one. Its walls were but twelve feet high. They were old, weak, and so full of cracks that it was quite common to see soldiers climb to the top by means of the support these crevices afforded to their hands and feet. The constant action of the sea-breeze had drifted one immense heap of sand against the shore-front of the work, and another in the immediate vicinity. These

sand-hills dominated the parapet, and made the fort untenable. Indeed, it was originally built by the engineers as a mere sea-battery, with just sufficient strength to prevent it from being taken by a *coup de main*. As an overpowering force of militia could always be summoned for its defense, it was supposed that no foreign army would ever attempt to besiege it. The contingency that the people of Charleston themselves might attack a fort intended for their own protection had never been anticipated.

Our force was pitifully small, even for a time of peace and for mere police purposes. It consisted of sixty-one enlisted men and seven officers, together with thirteen musicians of the regimental band; whereas the work called for a war garrison of three hundred men.

The first indication of actual danger came from Richmond, Virginia, in the shape of urgent inquiries as to the strength of our defenses, and the number of available troops in the harbor. These questions were put by a resident of that city named Edmund Ruffin; an old man, whose later years had been devoted to the formation of disunion lodges, and who became subsequently noted for firing the first gun at Fort Sumter. His love of slavery amounted to fanaticism. When the cause of the Rebellion became hopeless, he refused to survive it, and committed suicide.

In the beginning of July, Robert Barnwell Rhett, and other ultra men in Charleston, made violent speeches to the mob, urging them to drive every United States official out of the State; but as many influential Secessionists were enjoying the sweets of Federal patronage under Buchanan, we did not anticipate any immediate disturbance. To influence his hearers still more, Rhett did not hesitate to state that Hamlin was a mulatto, and he asked if they intended to submit to a negro vice-president.¹

It is an interesting question to know how far at this period the Secretary of War himself was loyal. Mr. Dawson, the able editor of the *Historical Magazine*, is of opinion, after a careful investigation of the facts, that Floyd at this time was true to the Union, and that he remained so until December 24th, when it was discovered that he had been advancing large sums of money from the Treasury to contractors, to pay for work which had never been commenced. To make the loss good, nearly a million of dollars was taken from the Indian Trust Fund.

Finding he would be dismissed from the Cabinet for his complicity in these transactions, and would also be indicted by the Grand Jury of the District of Columbia, he made a furious Secession speech, sent in his resignation, and suddenly left for the South.² Mr. Dawson founds his opinion in this case upon the statement of Fitz John Porter, who was a major on duty in the War Department at the time, and therefore apparently well qualified to judge. Floyd's actions toward us, however, were not those of a true man, and I am of opinion that his loyalty was merely assumed for the occasion. He sent seventeen thousand muskets to South Carolina, when he knew that Charleston was a hot-bed of sedition, and that in all probability the arms would be used against the United States. Greeley says, in his "American Conflict," that during these turbulent times Floyd disarmed the Government by forwarding one hundred and fifteen thousand muskets, in

¹ Hamlin's father named four of his sons, Europe, Asia, Africa, and America. The fact that one of them was called Africa gave rise to the statement that he was an African.

² He afterward returned, gave bail, and appeared before the court, because; he was aware that a rule existed that parties who had given evidence before a Congressional committee in reference to any defalcation could not be tried for having taken part in it.

all, to the Southern Confederacy.³ In addition to this, he sold large quantities of arms to S. B. Lamar, of Savannah, and other Secessionists in the South, on the plea that the muskets thus disposed of did not conform to the latest army model. Just before his resignation, he continued the same policy by directing that one hundred and twenty-four heavy guns should be shipped from Pittsburg, Pennsylvania, to Ship Island, Mississippi, where there was no garrison, and to Galveston, Texas. Yet this was the official upon whom we were to rely for advice and protection. This was the wolf who was to guard the fold.

Our commander, Colonel Gardner, had done good service in the War of 1812 and in Mexico; but now, owing to his advanced age, was ill fitted to weather the storm that was about to burst upon us. In politics he was quite Southern, frequently asserting that the South had been treated outrageously in the question of the Territories, and defrauded of her just rights in other respects. He acquiesced, however, in the necessity of defending the fort should it be attacked; but as he lived with his family outside of the walls, he could not take a very active part himself. Indeed, on one occasion, when a Secession meeting was held in our immediate vicinity, accompanied with many threats and noisy demonstrations, he sent word to me to assume command at once in his place.

He now found himself in a peculiar position. The populace were becoming excited, and there was every probability that a collision, accidental or otherwise, might occur at any moment between the troops and the mob outside, if not between the troops and the State militia. The dilemma which confronted him was either to make a disgraceful surrender of his command, or take the other alternative, and fight South Carolina single-handed, without the aid or co-operation of the General Government. He thought the difficulty might perhaps be solved by removing the garrison to Smithville, North Carolina, having received permission to do so, in case the yellow fever, which had proved so disastrous the previous year, should break out again. Strange to say, some of the most ultra papers in the Southern interest in New York and Charleston ridiculed the proposed movement. They probably feared that our absence might deprive the conspirators of the prestige of an easy victory.

By the middle of August the country people began to be quite violent in their language, and made many threats of what they would do in case of Lincoln's election.

While the rebellion was thus drifting onward, the North remained quiescent, utterly refusing to believe in the existence of any real danger. Yet it was publicly known that, although the Southern States had refused to commit themselves to Secession, they were pledged not to allow South Carolina to be coerced, and this practically amounted to a powerful league against the Union, since it was a combination to prevent the enforcement of the laws which bound the States together.

As we were liable to be attacked at any moment, we desired to get rid of the sand hills which dominated our walls. To this end we applied to the Quartermaster-general (General Joseph F. Johnston) for authority to hire citizen laborers; but he declined to accede to the request, on the ground that the work did not properly appertain to his department. He was a nephew of Floyd, and soon went over to the enemy. With the exception of Robert F. Lee, he subsequently became the most noted of all the rebel generals.

³ It is true there is a law authorizing the distribution of surplus United States arms to the States, but there were no surplus muskets on hand; and even if there had been, it was a very injudicious time to distribute them among the insurgent States. A little delay would have been both patriotic and judicious.

We were gratified, about the 1st of September, at seeing some signs of life in the Secretary of War, which seemed to show that he appreciated our dangers and difficulties. We ordered First Lieutenant and Brevet Captain John G. Foster, of the engineers, to repair to Fort Moultrie, and put that and the other defenses of Charleston harbor in perfect order. The reason privately assigned for this was that we were drifting into complications with England and France with reference to Mexico. For one, I gave the honorable secretary very little credit for this proceeding, inasmuch as he had just previous to this forwarded to South Carolina the means of arming and equipping seventeen thousand men against the United States. I, therefore, came to the conclusion that the forts were to be made ready for active service, in order that they might be turned over in that condition to the Southern League.

Two young lieutenants of engineers, G. W. Snyder and R. N. Meade, were soon after sent to Foster as assistants.

And here it may be well to speak of the officers of our command, as they were at that period. The record of their services afterward, during the rebellion, would constitute a volume in itself.

Colonel John L. Gardner was wounded in the war with Great Britain in 1812. He had also been engaged in the war against the Florida Indians, and the war with Mexico, receiving two brevets for the battles of Cerro Gordo and Contreras.

Seymour, Foster, and myself had also served in Mexico as second lieutenants on our first entrance into the army, and Davis as a non-commissioned officer of an Indiana regiment.

John G. Foster, severely wounded at Molino del Rey, and brevetted captain, was one of the most fearless and reliable men in the service.

Captain Truman Seymour, twice brevetted for gallantry at Cerro Gordo and Cherubusco, was an excellent artillery officer, full of invention and resource, a lover of poetry, and an adept at music and painting.

First Lieutenant Jefferson C. Davis, brave, generous, and impetuous—the boy-sergeant of Buena Vista—won his first commission in the regular army by his gallantry in that action.

First Lieutenant Theodore Talbot, when very young, had shared the dangers, privations, and sufferings of Fremont's party in their explorations to open a path-way across the continent. He was a cultivated man, and a representative of the chivalry of Kentucky, equally ready to meet his friend at the festive board, or his enemy at ten paces.

Doctor S. Wiley Crawford, our assistant surgeon, entered the service after the Mexican war. He was a genial companion, studious, and full of varied information. His ambition to win a name as a soldier soon induced him to quit the ranks of the medical profession.

Hall, Snyder, and Meade were recent graduates of the Academy, who had never seen active service in the field. They were full of zeal, intelligence, and energy.

In one respect we were quite fortunate: the habits of the officers were good, and there was no dissipation or drunkenness in the garrison. The majority of the men, too, were old soldiers, who could be thoroughly relied upon under all circumstances.

There was, also, one civilian with us, Mr. Edward Moale, who was clerk and brother-in-law to Captain Foster. His services were subsequently very valuable in many ways.

Fearing that in the course of events our correspondence might be tampered with, I

invented a cipher which afterward proved to be very useful. It enabled me to communicate, through my brother in New York, much valuable information to Mr. Lincoln at Springfield, Preston King, Roscoe Conkling, and other leaders of public opinion, in relation to our strength and resources.⁴

Situated as we were, we naturally desired to know how far Mr. Buchanan's Cabinet was willing to sustain us. William H. Trescott of South Carolina, was Assistant Secretary of State at this time, and frequently corresponded with his brother, Doctor Trescott, in Charleston. We, therefore, naturally thought the views of the latter might indirectly reflect those of the Administration. The doctor was of opinion there would be no attempt at coercion in case South Carolina seceded, but that all postal and telegraphic communication would cease, and a man-of-war be placed outside to collect the revenue. This arrangement would have our little force isolated and deserted, to bear the brunt of whatever might occur.

In October the disunionists became more bitter, but they were not disposed to be aggressive, as they thought Buchanan could be relied upon not to take any decisive action against them.

Colonel Gardner would not at this time mount the guns, or take any precautions whatever. He alleged, with reason, that the work was all torn to pieces by the engineers; that it was full of débris, and that, under the circumstances, he was not responsible for any thing that might happen. We had been promised a considerable number of recruits, but they were kept back; and we now ascertained that none would be sent until late in December, after the crisis was over.

In the latter part of the month I became quite unpopular in Charleston; partly on account of my anti-slavery sentiments, but more especially because some very offensive articles, written from that city, had appeared in the Northern papers, and were attributed to me. It seems that at this very time an abolition correspondent of the *New York Tribune* was employed in the office of Rhett's paper, the *Charleston Mercury*. This man professed to be the most loud-mouthed secessionist of them all. In conversation with me afterward, he claimed to be the author of the articles referred to.

In truth, these were days of extraordinary proscription for opinion's sake. I heard with profound indignation of the case of a poor seamstress from New York, who had been sent to jail in Charleston simply for stating that she did not believe in the institution of slavery. On appealing to the then mayor of New York, Fernando Wood, he replied that he was rejoiced she was in prison, and hoped she would be kept there.

Toward the close of the month, the South Carolina leaders began to fear that the other Southern States would not join them, and were engaged in discussing the subject of a French protectorate.

The negroes overheard a great deal that was said by their masters, and in consequence became excited and troublesome, for the news flew like wild-fire among them that "Massa Linkum" was coming to set them all free.

The enthusiasm of the moneyed men in Charleston began to cool when they reflected upon the enormous expenses involved in keeping up a standing army in an agricultural State like South Carolina. At the request of some Union men, Captain

⁴ My brother and myself each owned copies of the same dictionary. Instead of using a word in my correspondence, I simply referred to its place in the book, by giving the number of the page, number of the column, and number of the word from the top of the page.

Seymour made a startling exhibit, showing the large amount required to maintain even a moderate force. It had a good effect upon the merchants, and, indeed, if the other Southern States had not promptly sustained South Carolina, the movement must have soon collapsed from its inherent weakness.

Although the secession leaders were preparing to meet coercion, if it should come, I will do them the justice to say that they determined to commit no overt act against the Union so long as the State formed an integral part of it. They soon found, however, that the mob did not recognize these fine distinctions. It was easy to raise the storm, but, once under full headway, it was difficult to govern it. Independent companies and minute-men were everywhere forming, in opposition to their wishes; for these organizations, from their very nature, were quite unmanageable. The military commanders much preferred the State militia, because they could control it by law. A gentleman from the country, who had joined the minute-men, came in one day to the Charleston Hotel, with a huge cockade on his hat, expecting to be received with great applause; but, to his astonishment, he was greeted with laughter and ridicule.

On the 29th of October, General Scott wrote his celebrated letter to the President, recommending that strong garrisons be placed at once all the Southern forts. Undoubtedly this was good advice; but as our army was widely scattered all over the West to protect the frontier settlements from the Indians, only five small companies were available for the purpose. The suggestion, therefore, had but little practical value.

November had arrived. The muttering of the storm was heard all around us, and yet not one word of counsel or encouragement came from Washington. Colonel Gardner began to feel uneasy at this studied silence, and determined to place the responsibility of any disaster that might occur where it properly belonged. On the 1st of the month he made a full report to his next superior officer, General Wool, at Troy, New York, to be forwarded to the Secretary of War, in relation to the dangers that threatened us, and our imperfect means of defense. He notified them that our provisions would be exhausted by the 20th of the month, and that we were very deficient in ammunition and military supplies generally. The secretary, in his answer to this communication, simply expressed his regret that he had not been informed of all this before. This sympathy was no doubt very gratifying; but, being of an entirely passive nature, did not benefit us in the least. Colonel Gardner, at our solicitation, directed that the guns which had been dismantled to enable the engineers to make their repairs be remounted at once, and Seymour's company and mine soon placed them in position. It was of little use, however, to have our armament in readiness, unless the approaches to the fort could be carefully watched. This it was impossible to do by the ordinary system of guard duty; but I suggested a plan which enabled us to have an ample number of sentinels, without exhausting the men. It was done by placing each man on guard for a single hour, between tattoo and reveille, allowing him to sleep for the remainder of the night.