

## CHAPTER V.

## THE FIRST OVERT ACT.

The New Quarters.—Seizure of Castle Pinckney by Charleston Troops.—Raising the Flag at Fort Sumter.—The Sergeant's Daughter.—Major Anderson's Position.—The Charleston Troops take Fort Moultrie.—A Military Problem.—Condition of Fort Sumter.—Governor Pickens's Commission.—A New Outrage.

On the very day that these events occurred; the South Carolina commissioners, R. W. Barnwell, J. H. Adams, and James L. Orr, arrived in Washington to treat for the surrender of the forts and other public property. It proved to be a very inauspicious time for such a negotiation.

Our garrison were up betimes on the morning of the 27th, to inspect their new quarters. The soldiers thronged the parapet in such numbers as to attract the attention of the troops on board the *Niña*. That vessel steamed up to the city in great haste, and communicated the startling intelligence that Fort Sumter, in some inexplicable manner, had been fully re-enforced.<sup>1</sup> The chagrin of the authorities was intense. Messengers were at once dispatched to all parts of the city, to ring the door-bells and arouse the people.

While this was going on in town, Anderson, who was very punctilious in regard to settling all debts due by the United States to citizens, determined to send a detachment, under Lieutenant Davis, back to Fort Moultrie as a guard to Captain Foster, to enable him to pay off the claims of the workmen he had left behind. Doctor Crawford went over also, to look after some of his medical property. As the guard-boats had been withdrawn, they reached the fort without difficulty, and found it deserted. The people of the little village, to all appearance, were still ignorant of our change of station. Soon after their arrival, the party, in accordance with instructions from Major Anderson, set fire to the gun-carriages bearing on Fort Sumter, and destroyed all the ammunition and military material that could not be brought away. The guns had been spiked the night before, and the flag-staff was cut down, either at that time or in the morning.

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<sup>1</sup> Dawson's Historical Magazine.

As I have stated, the major took great pains to see that all bills, even those of a private nature, due in Charleston were fully paid by the officers and men of his command; but many leading merchants in the city were not so scrupulous. They gladly took advantage of the war to repudiate the claims of their Northern creditors. I was also informed by one of the pay-masters that a number of officers of the army who resigned to join the rebellion first deliberately drew their month's pay in advance, and then left the pay-master, as a penalty for his kindness, to make good the deficiency from his private funds, in order to settle his accounts.

Foster and Davis, finding Fort Moultrie still deserted, made good use of the occasion by loading up with supplies and ammunition one of the schooners which had been preciously chartered to carry over the women and children, and which were now lying empty at the wharf.

On their way back from this expedition our officers saw the Charleston troops going over to take possession of Castle Pinckney. The calm and dignified South Carolina Legislature had not authorized this outrageous proceeding. Even if we assume that the State had the right to secede, it does not follow that the public property within her limits properly belonged to her. It appertained to the nation at large, inasmuch as all the other States had contributed toward it, and therefore it was a proper subject of negotiation. To seize it at once, without a declaration of war, and while the subject was still pending, was a violation of all right and precedent. The hot-headed governor, however, irritated at our change of station, took the responsibility of commencing hostilities against the Union, without the co-operation of the Legislature, and this, too, at a time when the State was almost destitute of war material and funds. I doubt if there were more than half a dozen heavy guns on hand, and there were certainly not a dozen rounds of cannon-powder for each.

Major Anderson, who was a very religious man, thought it best to give some solemnity to our occupation of Fort Sumter by formally raising the flag, at noon, with prayer and military ceremonies. The band played "The Star-spangled Banner," the troops presented arms, and our chaplain, the Rev. Matthias Harris, offered up a fervent supplication, invoking the blessing of heaven upon our small command and the cause we represented. Three cheers were then given for the flag, and the troops were dismissed.

The seizure of Castle Pinckney, on the afternoon of the 27th, was the first overt act of the Secessionists against the sovereignty of the United States. As already stated, it was ordered by Governor Pickens, on his own responsibility, without the concurrence of the Legislature<sup>1</sup>. The latter, indeed, positively declined to sanction the measure. At 2 P.M. the Washington Light Infantry and Meagher Guards, both companies of Colonel J. J. Petigru's rifle regiment, embarked, under command of that officer, on board the *Niña*, and steamed down to the little island upon which the Castle is situated. When they arrived in front of the main gates they found them closed; whereupon they applied scaling ladders, and with eager, flushed faces made their way to the top of the wall. The excitement was needless, for there was no one there to resist them, the only fighting-men present being Lieutenant R. K. Meade, of the engineers, and Ordnance-sergeant Skillen, who resided there with his family, and who was in charge of the work. Meade, himself a Virginian, had a sharp colloquy with Petigru, and expressed himself in severe terms in relation to this treasonable assault.

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<sup>1</sup> See Dawson's story of Fort Sumter, in the Historical Magazine for January, 1872.

After taking possession, one of the rebel officers found the sergeant's daughter, pretty Kate Skillen, aged fifteen, weeping bitterly at the foot of the ramparts. He assured her no harm should befall her. She replied, "I am not crying because I am afraid!" "What is the matter, then?" said he. "I am crying because you have put that miserable rag up there," she said, pointing to the Palmetto flag which had just been raised to the top of the staff.

Foster's few reliable workmen proved to be a bad investment. It is said that most of them, when they found the enemy were actually coming, hid in closets, sheds, and under the beds, and some cried bitterly.

While this was going on, Major Anderson and myself stood side by side on the parapet, watching the scene through our spy-glasses. From his expressions of indignation, I was in hopes he would take prompt measures to close the harbor against any further encroachments of the State troops, made with a view to occupy Fort Moultrie or Fort Johnson. It would have required but a short time to mount a few pieces; and when these were once in position, it would have been easy to cut off all direct communication by water between the different posts. In short, he could take entire possession of the harbor. He did threaten to put out the lights in the lighthouses with his artillery, and close the port in that way; but his anger soon passed away, and he took no aggressive measures of any kind.

In my opinion, if he could have been satisfied that no other States would join South Carolina in her mad attempt, he would have done every thing that lay in his power to punish her; for he looked upon her as a spoiled child that needed correction. Having married a lady from Georgia, he had almost identified himself with that State. He did own a plantation and negroes there, but had recently sold them. The purchaser afterward refused to pay for them, on the ground that Anderson had destroyed their value by virtually warring against slavery. At this period the feeling in many parts of the South was strong against South Carolina. This was particularly the case among the young men of Georgia, who looked upon the leaders of secession in the Palmetto State as very presuming, because these leaders thought and acted as if they were the only representatives of Southern sentiment, and as if the leadership belonged to them as a matter of right. They seemed to consider that the mere fact of being born in South Carolina (or Carolina, as they called it, contemptuously ignoring North Carolina) constituted in itself a patent of nobility; and their implied scorn of other States caused the antagonistic feeling which I have mentioned. This was shared by Anderson, until he found that Georgia also would certainly secede. He then seemed to lose all interest in the Union, and merely desired to become a spectator of the contest, and not an actor. His efforts thenceforth were simply confined to making his fort secure against an assault. Hardly any amount of provocation could induce him to become the assailant.

On the day we left Fort Moultrie, Captain Humphreys, of the engineers, arrived there from Washington, with orders for Captain Foster from the Secretary of War. I have never learned the purport of these dispatches.

On the 27th, the day after we evacuated the place, Lieutenant-colonel Wilmot G. De Saussure arrived at Fort Moultrie, at 9 P. M., with his battalion of Charleston artillery and thirty riflemen; in all, one hundred and seventy men. (The companies composing the battalion were the Marion Artillery, the La Fayette Artillery, the German Artillery, and the Washington Artillery.) I was informed by a spectator that the newcomers were exceedingly cautious in making an entrance. They were looking out for mines in all directions, and had brought ladders with them, on the supposition that there might be torpedoes

in front of the main gates. It was a clear, beautiful evening, and the moon was at the full. They were greatly enraged to find the flag staff cut down, for they had hoped to run up their own flag on the very spot where ours had formerly waved. They found, too, the gun-carriages burned, and the guns, which had gradually settled down as the carriages gave way, resting with their breeches on the platforms, and the muzzles leaning against the walls. Out of the mouth of each hung a small white string. As many of the guns had been kept loaded for a considerable length of time, these strings had been tied by me to the cartridges, in order that the latter might be pulled out and sunned occasionally, as a precaution against dampness. De Saussure's men imagined that these strings were arranged with a view to blow up the guns the moment any one attempted to interfere with them, and each soldier, as he passed, avoided the supposed danger.

The South Carolina officers, at this period, spent much of their time in discussing military problems. One of these, which was afterward referred to us for solution, occasioned us much amusement. All cannon-balls used in the army, and exposed to the weather, are coated with a varnish of coal-tar, to protect them from rust. Many of those we left behind were in piles near the guns, and when the carriages were burned, the tar melted, ran down in streams, and coagulated in lumps. It was immediately reported that before leaving we had taken great pains to tar the balls, to render them useless. The problem which puzzled the military *savans* of Charleston was, to determine in what way cannon-balls were ruined by tar. Some months afterward, when we evacuated Fort Sumter, one of the officers who had been much interested in this subject took Seymour aside, and asked him confidentially if he had any objection to tell him why we tarred our balls, assuring him most earnestly that they could scrape it all off.

Upon occupying Fort Sumter, we found it was in a very unfinished condition, and that it would require an immense amount of labor to render it safe against an assault. It had no flanking defenses whatever. Three or four hundred men, with short ladders, could easily have taken it; for no guns were mounted, except a few on the gorge, and all the embrasures were open, there being no efficient means of closing them. On the gorge side, where the wharf was located, there were two sally-ports and numerous windows to be guarded. In the second story the embrasures were nothing but large unfinished openings, slightly boarded up. Three or four blows of an axe would have made a broad entrance for an escalating party. The form of the fort was a pentagon. Retaining a small force as a reserve in the centre of the work, we could only furnish eight men to defend each side and guard all the numerous openings.

Fortunately no assault was made. It was thought the fort was almost impregnable, and that there would be no difficulty in inducing Buchanan to order us back to Fort Moultrie. This occasioned a delay, and gave us time to strengthen our position. We were hard at work, mounting guns, preparing shells to be used as hand-grenades, stopping up surplus embrasures, and removing the débris which encumbered the passages from one part of the work to another. Quarters were selected for the officers, soldiers, and camp-women; and the household furniture which belonged to each, and which had been thrown pell-mell on the parade-ground, was all separated and deposited in the different rooms. I chose an apartment near the mess hall, and made it so comfortable that Anderson and Seymour came there temporarily to live with me. Our mess was also organized, and placed in charge of Mr. Edward Moale.

In the afternoon, Governor Pickens sent Colonel J. J. Petigru and Major Elison Capers, both field-officers of the rifle regiment, in full uniform, to interview Major

Anderson. Their looks were full of wrath, and they bowed stiffly and indignantly in answer to our smiling salutations. I was present at the conversation that ensued, but did not take notes. They told the major that perhaps he was not aware that an agreement had been entered into with President Buchanan not to re-enforce the forts in the harbor. They desired to call his attention to the fact that his recent movement was in direct violation of the contract referred to. They were, therefore, directed by the governor to request him, peremptorily but courteously, to immediately return to Fort Moultrie. Anderson replied, in substance, that he knew nothing of any such agreement; that as commander of the defenses of Charleston he had an inherent right to occupy any fort in the harbor. He stated that he, too, was a Southern man; that he believed the whole difficulty was brought on by the faithlessness of the North—here the aids made a stiff bow—but as regards returning to Fort Moultrie, he could not, and he would not, do it. The commissioners were then courteously dismissed.

I have always felt that this was a most insolent demand. If the governor considered himself aggrieved by our change of station, his redress lay in an appeal to Washington. This attempt to assume command of us, and order us out of a United States fort, was an assumption of authority that merited a more spirited reply.

Before his messengers left, I took occasion, in conversation with a person who came over in the boat with them, to refer to the great strength of the work, and I also spoke of the shells which we had prepared to throw down on the heads of an attacking party. I knew the conversation would be repeated, and hoped it might have some effect in deterring an immediate assault.

A new outrage now took place in full view of our garrison. The United States revenue cutter, which lay anchored in the stream, was turned over by its commander, Captain N. L. Coste, to the authorities of South Carolina. The previous seizures, made without a declaration of war, had been justified on the ground that the forts and public buildings were fixtures within the limits of the State. To retain this vessel was simply an act of piracy.

When it became apparent that South Carolina did not control the Administration in Washington, and that Anderson would not be ordered back, it is possible a boat attack might have been organized against us; but a storm came up about this time, and the wind was so violent that no small boat could venture out with safety. This occasioned still further delay, which enabled us to do much toward placing the fort in a better condition for defense.