

CHAPTER VII.

THE "STAR OF THE WEST."

Promise of Succor.—Fatal Delay.—A Contumacious Chaplain.—Visit from our Ladies.—Governor Pickens's Cabinet.—Appearance of the Star of the West.—The Vessel fired upon from Morris Island and Fort Moultrie.—Major Anderson's Protest.—Governor Pickens's Reply.

About the close of the year a great fear fell upon Charleston, for they had received positive information that a United States naval vessel was on its way to the city. The President had indeed acted promptly. On the 31st of December, he ordered the *Brooklyn*, man-of-war, under Captain Farragut, to take three hundred veteran soldiers on board from Fortress Monroe, as a re-enforcement for us, and then proceed to Charleston harbor to drive out the State troops, and resume possession of the public property. General Scott, the commander-in-chief, assented to the arrangement at the time; but, unfortunately, he was afterward seized with doubts as to whether the withdrawing of so many men from Fortress Monroe might not endanger its safety; and that being a far more important work than Fort Sumter, he did not like to run any risk in relation to it. He therefore induced Mr. Buchanan to change the order, and substitute for the *Brooklyn* a merchant vessel, loaded with supplies and two hundred and fifty recruits⁹. This was a fatal error, for the steamer chosen, the *Star of the West*, was, from its nature, wholly unfitted to contend with shore batteries. The general, who at this time was quite pacifically inclined, may have thought that if this vessel could slip in, and land its cargo unawares, he would have secured the harbor of Charleston without increasing the war fever in the South. Be this as it may, there is no doubt that his policy was too peaceful in the early days of the war. When a company of the most distinguished men in Washington was formed, under Cassius M. Clay, to prevent the capture of the President, and the destruction of the public buildings, he gave positive orders to Senator Nye, who was on duty at the Navy-yard, not to fire upon the enemy in case they came there to take possession.

⁹ The facts in this statement are taken from Dawson's Historical Magazine for January, 1872.

The original plan to succor us was excellent: the substitute was an utter failure. A change of this kind always occasions more or less delay, and in the present instance nearly a week elapsed before the vessel left New York. The enemy took immediate advantage of the time thus gained, to put up a work to control the main channel which passes by Morris Island, and which had previously been wholly unobstructed. They received the telegraphic notice on the 31st of December that a man-of-war would be sent, and the very next day the cadets of the Citadel Academy were hard at work at the new battery. It was located so that it would command the channel, and at the same time be beyond the reach of our guns. The clay was cold and rainy, and the wind blew fiercely. We wondered how long those boys would keep up their enthusiasm amidst the hardships and trials of the real war which was now fast approaching.

Our chaplain, who had been present at the raising of the flag, and had then returned to his family in Moultrieville, desired to make us another visit. For this purpose, he called upon the rebel commander at Fort Moultrie, and asked if there would be any obstacle thrown in the way of his crossing over to see us. The answer was, "Oh no, parson; I think I will give you a pass." The chaplain replied, "I did not ask you for a pass, sir! I am a United States officer, and I shall visit a United States fort whenever I think proper, without asking your permission. I simply desire to know whether you intend to prevent my going by force." He was not allowed to cross; and as he soon gave new proofs of contumacy by persisting in praying for the President of the United States, when asked to hold services in the chapel, before the rebel soldiers, he was soon banished, and his property confiscated.

The ladies we had left behind naturally felt a strong desire to be with us once more. My wife did not wish to ask permission of the rebel authorities, and I saw little chance of her coming in any other way. Nevertheless, to my surprise, she made her appearance at the wharf at Fort Sumter on the afternoon of the 3d of January. It seems she found a boatload of laborers about to make the passage, for the purpose of obtaining their back pay from Captain Foster. She took a seat in the stern of the boat, and told them to take her with them. The sentinel who was there to examine the passes did not interfere or ask her any questions, so she came over without difficulty. Mrs. Foster and her sister, Mrs. Smith, were already with us, having obtained a permit from the governor. Mrs. Seymour had made an unsuccessful application to the commander of Fort Moultrie, and had been somewhat rudely refused. Two clever little boys, sons of our generous-hearted sutler, Dan Sinclair, volunteered to row her across. After dark, they pulled a boat out from under a house up the beach; and as there was no guard there, Mrs. Seymour came over without difficulty.

The ladies were desirous of remaining an indefinite length of time; but we had no means of making them comfortable, and Major Anderson thought their presence would merely add to our embarrassment. In accordance with his wishes, they left that night and the next day. The cold was intense, and as all the wood was retained for cooking purposes, I was obliged to split up a mahogany table for fuel, to keep my wife from suffering during her brief visit. She and Mrs. Seymour went back with the Sinclair boys at midnight. They succeeded in making a landing, and in reaching the chaplain's house without being observed.

In the mean time, an amusing scene had occurred there. A very chivalrous gentleman, Ex-Governor Means, of South Carolina, had learned in some way that Mrs. Seymour had been rudely refused permission to visit her husband in Fort Sumter. He thought this

action of the commandant of Fort Moultrie harsh and unnecessary, and was kind enough to take the trouble to call at the chaplain's house to assure Mrs. Seymour that he would procure her a pass from higher authority. The chaplain hardly knew how to act. He did not like to tell the ex-governor that Mrs. Seymour had already gone, for fear it might get the Sinclair boys into trouble. He therefore pretended that Mrs. Seymour was confined to her room with a sick-headache. The ex-governor sent in repeated messages to beg that she would see him, if it was only for a moment, but the answers made up by Mrs. Harris were invariably in the negative. The chaplain afterward laughed heartily at the equivocal position he had been forced to assume.

Now that we were alone once more, we went to work with a will. The Baltimore laborers were of inestimable value. They did an immense amount of labor in the way of mounting guns, and moving weighty materials from one part of the work to another; but they showed no inclination to take part in the fighting, should any occur.

On the 3d, the South Carolina commissioners finally shook off the dust from their feet, and left Washington, having utterly failed to accomplish the object of their mission.

On the same day, the governor, through Mr. Gourdin's¹⁰ influence, permitted us to receive our mails once more. By this date we had mounted all the guns we were able to man on the lower tier, and had bricked up the surplus windows, sally-ports, and embrasures, as we had no one to guard them. The enemy, in the mean time, had erected a battery at Fort Johnson, and marked out another directly opposite to us in Moultrieville.

On the 6th, the mayor of New York, Fernando Wood, promulgated a message to the effect that the Union was breaking up, and recommending that the city of New York secede from the State. At this time the seeming indifference of the politicians to our fate made us feel like orphan children of the Republic, deserted by both the State and Federal administrations.

On the same day, Governor Pickens graciously allowed Mrs. Anderson to visit her husband, but coupled the permission with the ungenerous stipulation that the interview must take place in presence of witnesses. He disliked very much to disoblige her, as she belonged to one of the most distinguished families of Georgia, and had many influential relatives among the Secessionists. Mr. Gourdin too, who was a warm personal friend of her husband, exerted himself in her behalf. While she herself displayed great patriotism, several of her brothers in the final attack on Fort Sumter were on the opposite side, fighting against her husband. Under the circumstances, her visit to us was a brief one. She brought a valuable addition to the fort in the shape of Peter Hart, a gallant and trustworthy man, who had been Anderson's orderly sergeant in Mexico. She felt much easier in her mind, now that the major had Hart to look after him. He was only permitted to join us on condition that his duties were to be those of a civilian, and not of a soldier.

On the 8th, the governor, who, like Louis XIV., might very readily have said, "*L'état, c'est moi!*" concluded to form a cabinet to assist him in his onerous duties. He accordingly appointed J. G. Magrath Secretary of State; D. F. Jamison, Secretary of War; C. G. Memminger, Secretary of the Treasury; A. C. Garlington, Secretary of the Interior; and W. H. Harlee, Postmaster-general.

On the same day, our ladies, who had assembled at the Mills House, in Charleston, left for the North in a body, on account of the state of public feeling in the city¹¹.

¹⁰ One of the original leaders of secession, and a life-long friend and correspondent of Major Anderson.

¹¹ My wife applied for board in Charleston, but was told she must first obtain the sanction of Mr. Rhett, the

Their presence with us threw a momentary brightness over the scene, but after their departure every thing looked more gloomy and disheartening than before. The fort itself was a deep, dark, damp, gloomy-looking place, inclosed in high walls, where the sunlight rarely penetrated. If we ascended to the parapet, we saw nothing but uncouth State flags, representing palmettos, pelicans, and other strange devices. No echo seemed to come back from the loyal North to encourage us. Our glasses in vain swept the horizon; the one flag we longed to see was not there. It did come at last, in a timid, apologetic way, and not as a representative of the war power of the Government.

We had seen a statement in a Northern paper that a steamer named the *Star of the West*, which belonged to Marshall O. Roberts, was to be sent to us, under command of Captain John M'Gowan, with a re-enforcement of several hundred men and supplies of food and ammunition; but we could not credit the rumor. To publish all the details of an expedition of this kind, which ought to be kept a profound secret, was virtually telling South Carolina to prepare her guns to sink the vessel. It was hard to believe the Government would send to us a mercantile steamer—a mere transport, utterly unfitted to contend with shore batteries—when it could dispatch a man-of-war furnished with all the means and appliances to repel force by force. As the insurgents at this period had but few field-guns, and a very scanty supply of cannon-powder, the *Brooklyn* alone, in my opinion, could have gone straight to the wharf in Charleston, and have put an end to the insurrection then and there for we all know what its distinguished captain, Farragut, was able to accomplish when left to his own resources.

It seems, however, the news was literally true. The expedition was fitted out by Lieutenant Washington A. Bartlett, an ex-officer of our navy¹².

Although I had little faith in the announcement, I scanned with increased interest every vessel that approached the harbor.

Soon after daylight, on the morning of the 9th, I was on the parapet with my spy-glass; for I fancied, from a signal I had observed the previous evening on a pilot-boat, that something must be coming. As I looked seaward, I saw a large steamer pass the bar and enter the Morris Island channel. It had the ordinary United States flag up; and as it evidently did not belong to the navy, I came to the conclusion it must be the *Star of the West*. I do not remember that any other officers were on the lookout at this time. Anderson himself was still in bed. When the vessel came opposite the new battery, which had just been built by the cadets, I saw a shot fired to bring her to. Soon after this an immense United States garrison-flag was run up at the fore. Without waiting to ascertain the result of the firing, I dashed down the back stairs to Anderson's room, to notify him of the occurrence. He told me to have the long roll beaten, and to post the men at the guns on the parapet. I ran out, called the drummers, and had the alarm sounded. It took but a few minutes for men and officers to form at the guns in readiness for action. The battery was still firing, but the transport had passed by, and was rapidly getting out of range. At the same time it was approaching within gunshot of Fort Moultrie. The latter immediately opened fire

editor of the *Mercury*. She was afterward informed by the boarding-house keeper that, as the house depended on the patronage of the southern people for support, she (the landlady) could not undertake to harbor the wives of Federal officers.

¹² The army officers on board were First Lieutenant Charles I. Woods, Ninth Infantry, commanding; First Lieutenant William A. Webb, Fifth Infantry; Second Lieutenant Charles W. Thomas, First Infantry; and Assistant-surgeon F. G. S. Ten Broeck.

from one or two guns. Anderson would not allow us to return this fire; and the captain of the vessel, wholly discouraged by our failure to respond, turned about, and made his way back to New York. Two shots had struck the steamer, but no essential injury was done. I think the people in Fort Moultrie, who expected to be driven out to take refuge behind the sand-hills, were especially astonished at our inaction. It is very true that the Morris Island battery was beyond the reach of our guns. Still, we did not know this positively at the time; and our firing in that direction, even if ineffectual, would have encouraged the steamer to keep on its course. We had one or two guns bearing on Fort Moultrie; and as that was within easy range, we could have kept down the fire there long enough to enable the steamer to come in. It was plainly our duty to do all that we could. For any thing we knew to the contrary, she might have been in a sinking condition. Had she gone down before our eyes, without an effort on our part to aid her, Anderson would have incurred a fearful responsibility by his inaction.

Mr. Dawson, in his account of these incidents in the *Historical Magazine*, has it that a council of war was held by us to determine whether we would fire or not, and that we decided not to fire. He finds this upon verbal statements made by Foster and Davis. I know Foster was under this impression; but upon my recalling the circumstances to his recollection a short time before his death, he admitted his mistake. My memory is very clear and distinct on this point, and I am sustained in regard to it by both Seymour and Crawford. Davis I have not seen for some time, but I have no doubt he will confirm what I have said when his memory is refreshed.

Indeed there was no time for deliberation while the troops were at the guns, for the vessel was moving very rapidly, and the whole affair was over in a few minutes. The council was held after the steamer had gone, to determine what action ought to be taken in consequence of the attack. It was too late then for resistance, and all we could do was to send Lieutenant Hall to the governor with a flag of truce, to demand an explanation. In this communication, Anderson expressly stated that if he did not receive a satisfactory reply, he would not, hereafter, allow any vessel from Charleston to pass within reach of his guns. As might be expected, the governor replied that he took the responsibility of the firing, and would do it again under like circumstances. Anderson then reconvened the council to lay this answer before them. Through his influence it was concluded to send Lieutenant Talbot to Washington with a full statement of the occurrence, and await his return with specific instructions from the War Department. To carry out even this programme, the major was obliged to obtain the governor's permission for Lieutenant Talbot to pass through Charleston. It was urged by Anderson that the delay would enable us to finish our preparations for defense; but it was evident that time was far more valuable to the enemy than it was to us, for it enabled them to complete and arm their batteries, and close the harbor against our men-of-war, thus virtually imprisoning us in our island home.

When Talbot left, we resumed our labors as usual. No attempt was made to carry out the threat of stopping all passing vessels.

By the 14th of January our heavy guns were up; but by that time, too, the greater part of Fort Moultrie and Castle Pinckney were shielded from our direct fire by huge piles of sandbags¹³.

¹³ Castle Pinckney at this time was commanded by Colonel J. Johnston Petigru; Sullivan's Island, by Adjutant and Inspector-general Dunovant; Fort Johnson, by Captain James Johnson, of the Charleston Rifles. The United States Arsenal, by Colonel John Cunningham, of the Seventeenth South Carolina militia; its

We now began to get out of fuel, but we still had a resource in some wooden sheds inside the fort, which had been used as a temporary shelter for cement and building materials. Our position was greatly alleviated in one respect. Owing, it is said, to the influence of Mr. Gourdin, already referred to as a leading Secessionist, and an old friend of Major Anderson, we were allowed to receive our mails once more. After the *Star of the West* affair, they probably thought we were very harmless people, and deserved some reward for our forbearance.

former commander, Captain Humphreys, the United States military store-keeper, having been ejected on the 30th of December.