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RAPHAEL SEMMES

A Last Confederate Portrait

BY GAMALIEL BRADFORD, JR.

It is not likely that the romance of the one hundred and thirty volumes of Civil War Records will ever be written; yet the diligent searcher of those records finds many picturesque points to relieve his tedious hours. For instance, there is the matter of proper names. The novelist who invented 'Philip St. George Cocke' as a military hero would be laughed at for excess of fancy. Yet the Confederates rejoiced in such a general, who was killed early and is said to have been a good fighter. At any rate, he wrote up to his name in almost unbelievable fashion. He is not to be confused with his feebler Union duplicate, — I mean feebler as regards nomenclature, — Philip St. George Cooke.

Then there is Captain Coward. With that name would you not have chosen to be a preacher, or to follow any respectable profession of peace, rather than to inflict such a military *lucus e non lucendo* on a mocking world? And the parents of this unfortunate, when they had the whole alphabet to choose from, preferred to smite their offspring with the initial A, perhaps hoping — affectionately but mistakenly — that Alexander, or Ajax, or Achilles, would suffice to overcome the patronymic blight.

All which is but a prelude to the introduction of Raphael Semmes. Is not the name a jewel in itself? In Latin countries Raphael is a fairly common appellation; but we Saxons are usually familiar with only three instances of it, two artists and an archangel. Elements of both these characters may appear in the subject before us, but I think the artist somewhat predominated, and the other irresistibly suggests Lamb's description of Coleridge, 'an archangel — a little damaged.'

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Raphael Semmes

Really, for a pirate, could anything be finer than 'Raphael Semmes'? And it was always as a pirate that I shuddered at the commander of the Alabama in my boyhood dreams. I thought of him as a joyous freebooter, a Kidd, or a Red Rover, or a Cleveland, skimming the blue main like a bird of prey, eager to plunder and destroy, young, vigorous, splendidly bloodthirsty, gay in lace and gold, perhaps with the long locks, which, Plutarch assures us, make lovers more lovely and pirates more terrible. I cherished this vision even while I knew only vaguely of a certain Semmes. When better knowledge added 'Raphael,' my dream became complete.

Now it must go, with the other dreams of boyhood; for still better knowledge assures me that the man was not a pirate at all. I have his own word for this — or words, some hundred and fifty thousand of them. I have also most touching and impressive narratives of his officers, who were of so sympathetic a disposition that they were moved by their first captive's tears to the point of collecting a purse for him. I do not understand that they continued this habit; but to the very end I have no doubt the hard plight of an orphan would have worked upon their feelings as volcanically as upon the pirates of Gilbert and Sullivan.

Perhaps more convincing than this somewhat *ex parte* evidence, and indeed, conclusive, are the calmer statements of Union authorities. Throughout the war, 'pirates' was the universal cry of the Northern government and press. But Professor Soley, as competent as any one to give an opinion, declares that 'Neither the privateers, like the Petrel and the 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.' While Robert A. Bolles, legal adviser of the Navy Department, writing in the *Atlantic*, shortly after the war, to explain why Semmes was not prosecuted, asserts that he was 'entitled to all warlike rights, customs, and immunities, including the right to perform all of the customary cheats, falsehoods, snares, decoys, false pretences, and swindles of civilized and Christian warfare,' and that 'the records of the United States Navy Department effectively silence all right to complain of Semmes for having imitated our example in obedience to orders from the Secretary of the Confederate Navy.'

It is impossible to imagine anything more satisfactory than this, coming from such a source, and the talk of 'pirates' seems to be forever disposed

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of. Nevertheless, there is one authority on the other side, of such weight and significance, that I cannot altogether pass him by. This authority — American — is, indeed, speaking of privateers in the Mexican War; but the methods and practices animadverted upon are so closely akin to those of the Alabama that that vessel could hardly have escaped being included in the condemnation, in spite of her claim to be a duly authorized Confederate cruiser.

Our authority, then, speaks thus of the composition of crews. 'It is necessary that at least a majority of the officers and crew of each vessel should be citizens; not citizens made *ad hoc*, in fraud of the law, but *bona fide* citizens; and any vessel which might have attempted to cruise under a letter of marque and reprisal, without this essential requisite, would have become, from that moment, a pirate.'

Again, this writer expresses himself in the severest terms as to commerce-destroying generally. 'Indeed, there is a growing disposition among civilized nations to put an end to this disreputable mode of warfare under any circumstances. It had its origin in remote and barbarous ages, and has for its object rather the plunder of the bandit than honorable warfare. . . . From the nature of the material of which the crews of these vessels are composed, — the adventurous and desperate of all nations, — the shortness of their cruises, and the demoralizing pursuit in which they are engaged, it is next to impossible that any discipline can be established or maintained among them. In short, they are little better than licensed pirates; and it behooves all civilized nations, and especially nations who, like ourselves, are extensively engaged in foreign commerce, to suppress the practice altogether.'

By this time, I imagine that the indignant Southern reader is inquiring what twopenny authority I am thus setting up against the best legal judgment of the North itself. I answer, with hilarious satisfaction, no less an authority than Captain Raphael Semmes, who in discussing the question generally with regard to Mexico had little forethought of himself as a commissioned officer of the Confederate States.

No doubt he would have had a luxury of excuses and explanations, many of them reasonable. Still, I think we have here a delightful illustration of the difference between abstract theories and concrete applications; and if Seward and Welles could have got hold of this passage, they would have hailed it with infinite glee as indeed the utterance of a Daniel come to judgment.

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Raphael Semmes

Pirate or not, the career of the Sumter, and far more that of the Alabama, have a flavor of desperate adventure about them, which does not lack fascination for lovers of romance. 'Engaged in acts somewhat resembling the pranks of the buccaneers,' is the modest comment of Second Lieutenant Sinclair, and the facts amply bear him out.

The Alabama was built by stealth in England, in the summer of 1862, sailed from Liverpool under the British flag, and was commissioned practically on the high seas. Her crew were largely ruffians, sharked up from the worst corners of British seaports, requiring at all times a sharp eye and a heavy hand. The voyage was everywhere, now in Atlantic fog, now in Indian sunshine, battles with tropic storms, owl-flittings in murky twilight. Sometimes there would come a few days' repose in dubiously neutral ports. The captain would slip on shore for a touch of firm land, the sound of a woman's voice, perhaps a long ride over sunny mountains or through strange forests. On his return he would find half his crew drunk, the United States consul stirring up all sorts of trouble, and, it may be, an order to depart at once, half-coaled and half-provisioned. Or, as at Cape Town, among the friendly English, he would be half-suffocated with intrusive popularity.

Then it was up anchor and away, long months at sea, with incessant watchfulness. But the monotony was broken almost daily by fierce swoops upon Northern merchantmen, which were stopped, examined, seized, their crews taken aboard the Alabama, the vessels themselves — since there were no Confederate ports to send them to — burned with all their cargo, serving sometimes as a decoy to lure yet other victims within the reach of the insatiable aggressor. Any passengers on board the prizes were treated as were the crews, detained on the Alabama only until some convenient means was found of getting rid of them. Now and then among these were ladies, who at first regarded their captors with exaggerated fear. But the young officers managed to overcome this in most cases, and the lieutenant who boarded one large steamer returned with his coat quite bare of buttons which had been cut off for mementoes. Assuredly this was playing the pranks of buccaneers with a certain gayety.

The sordid side of such work is obvious enough. For a commissioned war vessel to sail about the world, doing no fighting, but simply capturing and destroying unarmed merchantmen, seems in itself neither very useful, very creditable, nor very amusing. As to the usefulness, however, the Alabama's depredations probably did as much as

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anything to develop the peace spirit among the merchants of the North, and Semmes was no doubt right in thinking that he seriously diminished the pressure of the blockade by drawing so much attention to himself. And he is further right in asserting, as to discredit, that what damage he did to property and what injury to persons is not to be named with the damage and injury done by Sherman without one whit more military excuse.

As to amusement, that is, excitement, the course of the Alabama supplied enough of it. Not to speak of winds and storms, to which she was incessantly exposed in her practically unbroken cruise of two years, there was the ever-present necessity of avoiding the Union men-of-war, a fleet of which was on the lookout, flying close upon her traces in every quarter of the globe. With the Northern press and the suffering merchants everywhere clamoring for redoubled vigilance, and an immense reward of glory awaiting the destroyer of the dreaded destroyer, every Union officer was most keenly alert. For instance, it is interesting to find Admiral Mahan, as a young midshipman, begging the Navy Department to give him a ship that he may pursue Semmes, then in command of his first vessel, the Sumter. 'Suppose it fails, what is lost? A useless ship, a midshipman, and a hundred men. If it succeeds, apart from the importance of the capture, look at the prestige such an affair would give the service.'

To evade hostility like this meant excitement enough. Yet for three years, in his two ships, Semmes did it, fighting only once, with an inferior vessel, the Hatteras, which he sank. When at last, on the nineteenth of June, 1864, in the English Channel, he met the Kearsarge, in fair fight, on nearly equal terms, it was by his own choice, not by compulsion; and on the whole, his ship made a good and creditable ending, though Professor Soley is probably right in thinking that the defeat was rather caused by inferior training and marksmanship on the Alabama than by the chain protection of the Union vessel, of which the Confederates made so much.

But what we are seeking is a closer knowledge of Semmes himself. To accord with his firefly craft and with 'pranks resembling those of the buccaneers,' you no doubt imagine a gay young adventurer, handsome, gold-laced, laughing, swearing, singing, in short, the romantic freebooter of my dreams above mentioned.

The real Semmes was nothing of the sort. To begin with, at the outbreak of the war he was an elderly man. Born in 1809, he took his early training in the United States Navy, then returned to civil life and practiced law, then

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went into the Mexican War, and served all through it with credit and distinction.

Seen as others saw him, he was anything but a piratical adventurer. He was not handsome, he was not winning, he was not magnetic. In fact, he gave rather the impression of a grave and reverend professional man than of a dashing captain, and some of his prisoners at first sight mistook him for a parson, an illusion quickly dispelled by a habit of marine phraseology which would not have been pleasing to Lee or Jackson. 'Lean, sallow, and nervous, much less like a mariner than a sea-lawyer,' is the description furnished by Rideing.

I do not know what better testimony to respectability, sanity, and conservatism could be had than that of Alexander H. Stephens, and Stephens speaks of Semmes as follows: 'For some years before secession he was at the head of the Lighthouse Board in Washington. He resigned as soon as Alabama seceded, though he agreed with me thoroughly in my position on that question, as his letters to me show. He was a Douglas man, and you need not therefore be surprised, when I tell you that I considered him a very sensible, intelligent, and gallant man. I aided him in getting an honorable position in our navy, and in getting him afloat as soon as possible, which he greatly desired.'

Fortunately, however, we are not obliged to depend on any external testimony. We have plenty of writing of the man's own which throws wide light upon his soul. He kept a careful log-book of both his cruises. This was used as a basis for the book written about him, called, *Cruise of the Alabama and Sumter*, and again, by himself, in his huge *Memoirs of Service Afloat during the War between the States*. But the original, as printed in the *Official Records*, is far more valuable than the later studied and literary narratives.

To begin with, one cannot help being impressed with his fine intelligence. He had a mind constantly working, and trained to work with ease, assurance, and dispatch. This is perhaps most striking in his immense legal ingenuity. His position brought him daily into contact with the nicest and most puzzling international questions, both of law and morals, from the disposition of his prizes to the disposition of himself, when he surrendered his vessel, let her sink under his feet, and after he was picked out of the water by the English yacht, Deerhound, betook himself to England and safety, instead of to the Kearsarge and a Northern prison. On all these points he is inexhaustible in legal lore, fertile in persuasive argument, and most apt and energetic in making every possible suggestion tell.

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Nor would I intimate that in all this abundant discussion he is not sincere, or any less so than the average lawyer. He is, indeed, quick to take advantage of every quibble. But the long legal cases in regard to many of his captures recorded in his log-book — that is, mainly for his own eye — seem to me to indicate a mind much open to conscientious scruples and a feeling that his elaborate argument must convince himself as well as others.

Much more attractive evidence of Semmes's intellectual power than can be furnished by his legal pyrotechnics is his early book about the Mexican War. A more intelligent narrative of travels it would be difficult to find. There is not only the wide-open eye of the sympathetic observer; but the comments on the social life of the people, on their industries, their manners, their morals, government, and religion, are sober, fruitful, and suggestive, and may be read to-day with perhaps even more profit than fifty years ago.

Still, a pirate might be intelligent. Let us take other aspects of Semmes's character. How did he treat his prisoners, of whom, first and last, there must have been hundreds? His own account and that of his officers is, of course, highly favorable. He admits that at first, as a measure of retaliation for Union treatment of captured 'pirates,' he was unnecessarily rigid in the use of irons, but he asserts that in the main captives were made as comfortable as circumstances permitted, and he insists especially that at no time was there any pillaging of private personal property. 'We may as well state here,' writes Lieutenant Sinclair, 'that all our prisoners were housed on deck from necessity, the berth-deck being crowded by our own men. But we made them as comfortable as we could under the circumstances, spread awnings and tarpaulins over them in stormy weather, and in every way possible provided for their comfort. They were allowed free rations (less the spirit part), and their own cooks had the range of the galley in preparing their food to their taste. Indeed, when it is considered that our men had watch to keep and they none, they were better off for comfort than ourselves.' This, of course, refers only to the men. When women were brought on board, they were given the officers' own staterooms.

Both Semmes and his lieutenants take great pride in the humane treatment of persons on board the large steamship, Ariel. When the ship was taken, the plan was to burn her and land the prisoners at Kingston. There was fever in Kingston, however; so rather than take the risk of infection, the vessel was allowed to go on her way under bond. Semmes's remark on this in his log (not in his published narrative) savors delightfully of the charity of Glossin in *Guy Mannering*.

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'It would have been inhuman to put ashore, even if permitted (and I greatly doubted on this point) so large a number of persons, many of whom were women and children, to become victims perhaps to the pestilence.'

And what do the prisoners themselves say about it? Naturally their view was somewhat different. Complaints appear of rough usage, chiefly of the employment of irons, which was at times manifestly necessary where the number of captives was so large. 'The manner of the master of the steamer was overbearing and insolent in the extreme,' writes one victim, 'and it was at the great risk of the personal safety, if not of the life, of the deponent, that he so strenuously insisted upon his ship and cargo being released.' But in general there is a remarkable — all the more so because grudging — agreement that things were conducted peaceably and civilly, and that no personal violence was used in any case. Here again the testimony of Bolles, who had made a thorough and hostile investigation, is conclusive. 'In no one single solitary instance was there furnished a particle of proof that "the pirate Semmes," as many of my correspondents called him, had ever maltreated his captives, or subjected them to needless and unavoidable deprivation.'

It may be suggested that this line of conduct was dictated rather by policy than by kindness of heart. What then was Semmes's treatment of his crew? On this point also, the testimony is conflicting. I have said that they were necessarily a rough lot. Semmes puts it more strongly: 'The fact is, I have a precious set of rascals on board — faithless in the matter of abiding by their contracts, liars, thieves, and drunkards.'

To have managed such a company, in sole authority, for two years, over the vast solitudes of ocean, is in itself strong testimony to executive ability and force of character. It is evident that stern and constant severity was needed, and Semmes employed it, as he himself admits. I do not find any proof that the severity was excessive. In cases of open and extreme disorder, punishment was awarded by formal court-martial, and not suddenly, or in anger. The harshest instance seems to have been that of the captured deserter Forrest, who, after being several times spread-eagled in strenuous fashion, was put ashore in irons on a desert coast, the crew, without the knowledge of the captain, subscribing a purse which they hoped would enable him to get off, as it did. But the officers agree that Forrest's rascality stood out, even in that choice collection.

It is as to the result of this severity in producing discipline, that there is a

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most interesting disagreement of witnesses. Semmes himself declares that it accomplished its object. 'Many of my fellows, no doubt, thought they were shipping in a sort of privateer, where they would have a jolly good time and plenty of license. They have been woefully disappointed, for I have jerked them down with a strong hand, and now have a well-disciplined ship of war.' His officers confirm his statement energetically. Lieutenant Sinclair writes: 'No better proof of the judicial methods of discipline outlined by Semmes could be submitted, than that under them, though engaged in 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 perfect peace, and at the same time in a state of perfect contentment.'

With this beatific vision it is really amusing to compare the assertions of some of the prisoners on the Alabama, who inspected conditions with a curious, though perhaps a somewhat malignant, eye. 'All the men forward are English and Irish,' says one observer, 'no Americans. The officers are Southerners, and, with the exception of the captain and first lieutenant, seem ignorant of their duties. The discipline on board was not very good, though the men seemed to be good seamen. They were over an hour setting the two topgallant sails. The men appeared to be dissatisfied.' And if it be urged that this was in September, 1862, before conditions were comfortably adjusted, we can turn to a still more severe account given by a reliable witness, in November, 1863, when the Alabama had run more than half of her brief career. 'Crew much dissatisfied, no prize money, no liberty, and see no prospect of getting any. Discipline very slack, steamer dirty, rigging slovenly. Semmes sometimes punishes, but is afraid to push too hard. . . . Crew do things for which would be shot on board American man-of-war; for instance, saw one of crew strike a master's mate; crew insolent to petty officers; was told by at least two thirds of them that they would desert on the first opportunity. . . . While on board saw drill only once, and that at pivot guns, very badly done; men ill-disciplined and were forced to it; lots of cursing.'

In such surroundings it might be vain to look for personal attachment. Perhaps even Jackson or Stuart would have been unable to inspire any. Still, in his book — not in his log — Semmes speaks of both officers and crew with what appears to be real affection. 'When men have been drenched and wind-beaten in the same storm, . . . there is a feeling of brotherhood that springs up between them, that it is difficult for a landsman to conceive.' His sailors certainly had immense confi-

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dence in him, as well they might, and it is said that, after the loss of the Alabama, many of them came and begged him to procure another ship. I do not find related of him, however, any incident so touching as that told by Lieutenant Kell — too simple and too human to have been invented, by Kell, at any rate — of the dying seaman, who, as his officer was leaving the Alabama, then about to sink, 'caught my hand and kissed it with such reverence and loyalty — the look, the act, lingers in my memory still.' Surely they were not all infernal rascals on board that pirate.

If we look at Semmes, for a moment, in other concerns of life besides the official, we shall find much that is attractive to complete the picture of him.

So far from having anything of the typical pirate's mercurial affections, he seems to have been a man of peculiarly domestic habit, much attached to his wife and to his children. The temporary presence of children and their mothers on the Alabama is referred to in his book with great feeling. 'When I would turn over in my cot, in the morning, for another nap, in that dim consciousness which precedes awakening, I would listen, in dreamy mood, to the sweet voice of the canary, the pattering of the tiny feet of the children, and their gleeful voices over my head, . . . and giving free wing to fancy, I would be clasping again the absent dear ones to my heart.' Less literary, and therefore even more convincing, are the little touches of tenderness interspersed among the scientific observations and political discussion of the log-book. 'The governor sent me off a fine turkey, and some fruit, and his lady a bouquet of roses. The roses were very sweet, and made me homesick for a while.' Again, 'I am quite homesick this quiet Sunday morning. I am two long, long years and more absent from my family, and there are no signs of an abatement of the war.'

The same sensibility that shows in this home feeling manifests itself in other ways. Semmes was not only a wide reader in his profession and in lines connected with it, but he loved literature proper, read much poetry, and quoted it aptly. He was singularly sensitive to beauty in any form.

Above all, his diary reads almost like that of a naturalist — Darwin or Bates — in its close, intelligent, and affectionate observation of nature. Roving all over the tropic world of land and water, at a time when such study was less common than now, he kept his eyes open for both exceptional and ordinary natural phenomena. He had the keenest interest in the working of tides, storms, and currents, and not only records minutely all the empirical detail of such matters, but goes into

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elaborate discussion of the causes of them, illustrating with plans and diagrams which quaintly diversify the cargo lists of Yankee schooners and the recital of attempts to blarney pompous officers of Portugal and Spain.

Nor is the appreciation of the charm of nature less than the sense of its scientific interest. Every opportunity of landing is seized as giving the tired sea-wanderer a chance to satisfy his love of the soil, and he paints delightful pictures of tropic scenes and things and people. Here again the more elaborate specimens are to be found in the books, especially in the earlier one on Mexico; but I prefer the piquant freshness of little touches jotted down under the immediate impression in the diary of the day. How graceful, for instance, is this description of Fernando de Noronha: 'The island at the season at which we visited it was a gem of picturesque beauty, exceedingly broken and diversified with dells and rocks and small streams, etc. It was the middle of the rainy season. The little mountain paths as we returned became little brooks, that hummed and purled on their rapid course.' Or this again of Martinique: 'In the afternoon strolled on the heights in the rear of the town, and was charmed with the picturesque scenery on every hand. The little valleys and nooks in which nestle the country homes are perfect pictures, and the abrupt and broken country presents delightful changes at every turn.' While the following passage adds a personal note which is as attractive as it is evidently sincere: 'Visited the Savannah [Fort St. Louis] to hear the music, which is given every Sunday evening. It was a gay and beautiful scene, the moon, the shade trees, the statue of Josephine, the throng of well-dressed men and women, the large band and the fine music, the ripple of the sea, and last, though not least, the katydids so fraught with memories of home, dear home!'

And if Semmes was emotional and sensitive, he was also conscientious, high-principled, and genuinely religious. *Aide-toi et Dieu t'aidera* was the motto of the Alabama, and past question her commander trusted in God as well as in his own right arm. He inherited the Catholic faith and persisted in it with evidently sincere as well as intelligent devotion. His argument, in his book on Mexico, for the value to humanity of a liturgical service is as clear and cogent as his criticism of the excessive influence of an ignorant clergy in Mexican life. The touches of personal religion in his diary are absolutely free from pretentiousness and are very winning in their simplicity. Sometimes, indeed, there is a naïve mixture of his worldly occupa-

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tions with his spiritual zeal. 'I have thus spent a busy day, without having time even to read a chapter in the Bible, and all for nothing — one Dutchman and two Englishmen.' But elsewhere the fervent outpouring of pious ejaculation is quite unmingled with any taint of sordid cares. 'My life has been one of great vicissitude, but not of calamity or great suffering, and I have reason to be thankful to a kind Providence for the many favors I have received. I have enjoyed life to a reasonable extent, and I trust I shall have fortitude to meet with Christian calmness any fate that may be in store for me, and to undergo the great change, which awaits us all, with composure and a firm reliance upon the justice and goodness of God.'

I think you must be asking now, with some astonishment, where is that pirate?

The practical Christian virtues, too, seem to be present, in desire at least, as well as Christian aspiration. Some of Semmes's reported utterances might make one think he lacked patience. He thinks so himself. 'I am not discouraged, but I have had an excellent opportunity to practice the Christian virtue of patience, which virtue, I think, I am a little deficient in.' Humility, also, he endeavors to cultivate, when winds and seas tempt an angry criticism of the order of nature. 'One of the most temper-trying of the *contemps* of a seaman's life is, when your position is such as to render your latitude very important to you, to have a squall come up just before it is time to look out for the sun, and to rain and obscure everything until it is a very [few] minutes too late for you, and then to have the sun shine out brightly, as if in mockery of your baffled desire. Such was the case to-day, this being the second day that we are without an observation for latitude. But I endeavor to profit by these trials, as they teach me a lesson of humility. What is man, that the sun should shine for him? And then, in our stupidity, we fail to see things in their true light; all the occurrences of nature, being in obedience to wise laws, must of course, be the best.'

With the insight into Semmes's inner life and private character thus acquired, we are better able to appreciate the really lofty motives that animated him in his public service. His perfect courage, his entire determination and persistence in effort, are beyond dispute. Read the accounts of the calmness and self-sacrifice with which, in spite of a painful wound, he managed every detail of his last combat. The only aspersion upon him here is that he did not give himself up as a prisoner after being rescued by the Deerhound. It is possible that Lee or

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Raphael Semmes

Albert Sidney Johnston would have done this; but were there many officers in either the Union or the Confederate service who would have strained honor to a point so quixotically fine?

And back of the persistence in effort was an equally indisputable patriotism. Whether we agree with Semmes or not, we must recognize that he believed as heartily in the cause he was fighting for as did Davis or Lee. Thoughts like the following, confided to the intimate privacy of his diary, are incontestable evidence of sincerity as well as of devotion. 'My dear family I consign with confidence to God's care, and our beloved country I feel certain He will protect and preserve, and in due time raise up to peace, independence, and prosperity. Our struggle must be just and holy in His sight, and as He governs the world by inexorable laws of right and wrong, the wicked and cruel people who are seeking our destruction cannot fail to be beaten back and destroyed. But it may be His pleasure to scourge us severely for our past sins and unworthiness, and to admit us to his favor again, only when we shall have been purified.'

Nor was this patriotism of Semmes much tempered by personal ambition or by any stimulus of excitement or adventure. The young officer in Mexico may have felt these things, but the captain of the Alabama was well over fifty, and at that age personal comfort means more than plaudits and laurels. It is really most curious to see the supposedly triumphant and exultant pirate sighing over the tediousness and weariness of his lot and eager to give 'a thousand leagues of sea for one acre of barren ground.' 'Perhaps this constant, stormy tumbling about at sea is the reason why we seamen are so calm and quiet on shore. We come to hate all sorts of commotion, whether physical or moral.' And again, even more vividly and pointedly: 'Barometer gradually falling. 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 a man ought to be subjected to the hardships and discomforts of the sea. Sea-going 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 accompaniments of rolling and tumbling, hard, overcast skies, etc., gives me the blues.'

Yet, in spite of age, of gray respectability, of undeniable fine qualities, there is in Semmes a certain strain of the pirate, after all. About many of his

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utterances there is a violence not only fierce but coarse, a tone of offensive vituperation much more appropriate to Captain Kidd than to a Christian soldier. His own friends recognize this to the extent of apologizing for it. 'Semmes's verbal and written utterances,' says Sinclair, 'manifest a bitterness of feeling toward his foes which is calculated to mislead one respecting his real character. . . . He was uniformly just in his decisions. He respected private property and private feelings. And it was the rule, rather than the exception, that he provided in the best possible way for his prisoners, military and civil; and we have often seen that he gave them boats and whatever their ships afforded of comfort and luxury to get away with. This was not the conduct of a malevolent partisan, but distinctly that of a generous and chivalrous foe. It is by his acts rather than by his utterances that a man like Semmes should be judged. He had a noble and generous soul.'

Unfortunately our words sometimes go further than our acts, especially when we print them, and it is hard to reconcile all that Semmes wrote with perfect nobility or generosity.

It is true, he had much excuse. He was pursued with scorn and vilification which no one thought of bestowing on Johnston or Lee; yet there was no reason for calling him a common malefactor and enemy of the human race, any more than them. It is true, further, that his tongue often belied his real feeling, as it occasionally showed itself; for instance, when, long after the war, he replied 'very gently' to Mrs. Kell, who asked him to help reconcile her husband, 'He has fifteen years or longer to live to feel as I do. I am fifteen years his senior. Give him that long to grow reconciled to things as they are.' Finally, it is true that the ugly violence of expression does not appear in the earlier Mexican book, which is a model of dignity, sanity, and self-restraint. In short, a nervous, sensitive, high-strung nature was irritated beyond control of itself by the long strain of toil and hardship and exposure. As Semmes admirably expresses it, speaking of his antagonist, Winslow: 'I had known, and sailed with him, in the old service, and knew him *then* to be a humane and Christian gentleman. What the war may have made of him, it is impossible to say. It has turned a great deal of the milk of human kindness to gall and wormwood.' Certainly Semmes's human kindness had been gravely affected in that way, and none of the above explanations will serve to excuse a manner of speech which would have been impossible not only for Lee or Stephens, but even, under any circumstances, for Beauregard, or Johnston, or Longstreet.

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Such a charge must be supported by illustrations, however offensive. But it should be understood that these illustrations are not unique, but merely represent the general tone of Semmes's book, *Memoirs of Service Afloat during the War between the States*. Even in the earlier, simpler diary of actual war days, a note is sounded that is far from agreeable. 'If the historian perform his duty faithfully, posterity will be amazed at the wickedness and corruption of the Northern and Western people, and will wonder by what process such a depth of infamy was reached in so short a time. The secret lies here: the politicians had become political stockjobbers, and the seekers of wealth had become knaves and swindlers; and into these classes may be divided nearly the whole Yankee population. Such is "Plymouth Rock" in our day, with its Beechers in the pulpit and its Lincolns in the chair of Washington, its Sumners and Lovejoys in Congress, *et id omne genus* in the contract market.'

One expects this sort of abuse from irresponsible agitators, North and South both. One does not expect it from officers and gentlemen. But the language of Semmes's book is far worse. 'The pay of the Federal Consul at Maranham, was, I believe, at the time I visited the town, about twelve hundred dollars per annum. As was to be expected, a small man filled the small place. He was quite young, and with commendable Yankee thrift, was exercising, in the consular dwelling, the occupation of a dentist; the "old flag" flying over his files, false teeth, and spittoons. He probably wrote the dispatch, a copy of which had been handed me, in the intervals between the entrance and exit of his customers. It was not wonderful, therefore, that this semi-diplomat, charged with the affairs of the Great Republic, and with the decayed teeth of the young ladies of Maranham, at one and the same time, should be a little confused as to points of international law and the rules of Lindley Murray.'

The man who wrote that had a coarse streak in him somewhere. Stuart liked rhetoric, but he could never have written that. Jackson detested Yankees, but he could never have written that.

And with this vein of detestable facetiousness Semmes mingles an almost equally trying assortment of cheap heroics. He quotes Byron, 'Don Juan,' and 'The Corsair,' and 'The Island,' until you would think Conrad and Lara were his ideals, and Jack Bunce, *alias* Altamont, his model.

Such a tribute to the power of the gallery goes a long way to prepare us for the description furnished by one of Semmes's captives, the master of the Brilliant, a description no doubt exaggerated, but which may not seem so

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much so now, as when we were fresh from the touching — and absolutely genuine — passages about home and God. It may be added that this is the only explanation I have seen of 'Old Beeswax,' a name accepted by Semmes himself and frequently referred to by officers and crew. I quote from the New York *Herald* of October 17, 1862.

'Captain Hagar says that however much Semmes may have had the appearance of a gentleman when an officer of the United States Navy, he has entirely changed now. He sports a huge mustache, the ends of which are waxed in a manner to throw that of Victor Emmanuel entirely into the shade, and it is evident that it occupies much of his attention. His steward waxes it every day carefully, and so prominent is it that the sailors of the Alabama call him "Old Beeswax." His whole appearance is that of a corsair, and the transformation appears to be complete from Commander Raphael Semmes, U. S. N., to a combination of Lafitte, Kidd, and Gibbs, the three most noted pirates the world has ever known.'

So you see, I can cherish a watery image of my pirate, after all. And if the words attributed to him by his near friend, Maffit, on the sinking of his ship, are genuine, neither Cleveland nor the Red Rover could have struck an attitude or phrased an exit more effectively. 'Raising his sword with affectionate solicitude, he gently placed it on the binnacle, sorrowfully exclaiming, "Rest thee, Excalibur, thy grave is with the Alabama."'

Excalibur! oh!



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