

A Leaf from my Log-Book.

By W. F. SHIPPEY.

The gray dawn of a frosty morning in February, 1865, broke upon a party of about one hundred officers and men in the uniform of the Confederate States navy, assembled at Drewry's Bluff, on the banks of the James river, Virginia. The morning was very cold, and as the men were formed in two ranks and their arms and equipments carefully inspected by the officers, it was easy to see that stern work and great danger was to be encountered, by the unusual attention given to this inspection, and the expression, half serious, half reckless, that characterized the men who, in those stirring times, were familiar with dangers and hardships. After some little delay in arranging preliminaries, the little command moved off in the direction of Petersburg, then invested by Grant's army. The situation at this time was gloomy and the hearts of the bravest had begun to fail. The enemy was pushing hard, and our brave army, reduced by sickness, death and disability, had diminished to a mere handful, to face the overwhelming numbers of our well-fed, well-clothed and well-equipped foe. Every effort had been made to compel the enemy to fall back, but without success. Grant's army then held the lower James river, his base of supplies being at City Point, and the heavy Federal monitors lay at anchor there, protected from an attack of our navy by obstructions in the river. Our iron-clads and gunboats inactive at Chaffin's Bluff; officers and men restless under their forced inactivity and eager to try their strength against the enemy's fleet and share the laurels being won by our more fortunate brother officers who were upon blue water.

If we could gain possession of the river and hold it Grant would be compelled to fall back, as City Point would no longer furnish him a base and the James river an avenue of supplies, and to effect this object, the possession of the river at City Point, it was decided to

make an effort to blow up the Federal iron-clads, clear a passage for our fleet and force the abandonment of City Point, or compel Grant to fall back or bring his supplies from Norfolk. To drive him back would have necessitated an army equal in numbers to his own and a fearful cost of life.

Under these conditions Lieutenant C. W. Read, of the navy, organized an expedition whose object was to carry boats, fitted with torpedoes, on wheels, and, turning Grant's left, strike boldly across the country in his rear, cross the Blackwater, and launch our boats in the James above their anchorage at Hampton Roads, capture some passing tugs, fix our torpedoes on them, ascend the river and strike the largest monitors at City Point. The larger monitors once destroyed, our fleet could easily scatter the wooden gunboats, and the James river would be open from Richmond to Hampton Roads. The expedition was a hazardous one from its incipiency, the enemy having declared their determination to show no mercy to prisoners taken on torpedo service. We had to operate in rear of Grant's army—a handful of men, with an army of one hundred and fifty thousand between us and our friends—and every man on the expedition fully understood and appreciated the danger we ran. If we were successful in reaching the James river our dangers would have but just commenced, as we would have to board and capture an unsuspecting craft, of whose fitness for our purpose we would have to judge from appearances at long range; the capture might attract attention of the men-of-war and make us the captured instead of the captors, or, our plan discovered, we would have a long way to retreat in order to reach a place of safety. Added to these difficulties, the weather was very cold, the roads rough, and the path before us a *terra incognita*. Surely to face such dangers and hardships, even though success did not crown our effort, deserves a mention in history, and I am not aware that anything has been written in relation to this expedition, which, if successful, would have crowned each one of those engaged in it with laurels as undying as those that deck the brows of the heroes of Thermopylæ. I suppose that the modesty of the principal actor, the brave Read, forbade his publishing an account of the expedition which was, through the treachery of one of our most trusted men, a failure; but reverses and failures, as well as grand successes, should be chronicled, as evidences of the *spirit* that animated our men and the willingness to embark in almost hopeless undertakings, literal forlorn hopes, without the stimulus of the excitement of battle or the probabilities of a name on the roll of honor.

The expedition was composed of Lieutenant C. W. Read, Lieutenant W. H. Wall, Master W. F. Shippey, Passed Midshipmen Scott and Williamson, and Lieutenant of Marine Crenshaw, a Surgeon from the fleet (whose name, I regret to say, I cannot now recall) and about ninety seamen and marines. The officers and sailors were armed with ship's cutlasses and revolvers, and the marines with rifles. The boats were placed in chocks on four wagon wheels, torpedoes, poles and gear inside, and each drawn by four mules. One, Lewis, a volunteer officer of the Navy, had been sent ahead to reconnoitre, and was to meet us at the ford of the Blackwater and pilot us to the James. How he fulfilled his engagements will be shown in the sequel. This man Lewis was mate of an American ship lying in Norfolk harbor at the time of the secession of Virginia, and had left his ship to join the Confederates, had served faithfully in the army, been wounded at Bull Run, transferred to the Navy and commissioned an Acting Lieutenant, and was considered worthy of trust and confidence.

Our first day's march brought us to General Anderson's headquarters, the right of our army, where we encamped that night, and, breaking camp early the following morning, we struck out from our picket line to gain the old Jerusalem plank road—our party being reinforced by two young English gentlemen, guests of General Anderson, who thought they would "like to see the fun." A short distance outside of our lines we had our first alarm, running up nearly face to face with a column of the enemy coming up to attack our troops on the right. By a "change of base" we managed to dodge them, and they passed on, paying little heed to us, who they doubtless supposed to be a picket post, and soon the firing in our rear told us that the "ball had opened." We passed on our way, well assured that the fight going on behind would serve to attract attention from us and favor our march. We knew not what proportions the battle would assume or what would be the result, nor felt we much uneasiness, for was not one, Lee, and his brave boys in gray there to attend to them? Of our two volunteers, I never heard more, but suppose they found their way back to General Anderson's headquarters, as they were mounted and had only to follow the retreating cavalry pickets.

We were now fairly embarked on our expedition, pushing our way through the enemy's country and separated from our friends by his army.

Our march was in three detachments, the advance under Read

and Ward, about one hundred yards ahead of the wagon train; Crenshaw, with his marines, about the same distance in rear of them, and Shippey commanding the center, with the wagon train. Fortunately we met no stragglers or foraging parties of the enemy, and were not disturbed, and after a good day's march, we bivouacked in good spirits and very tired. The following day's march was without incident worthy of mention, an occasional false alarm or seeking the cover of woods to screen us from chance observers. Indeed, we were out of the line of travel, the Federals did all their business at City Point, and there was little more to attract anyone to this part of the country than to the Siberian deserts.

During the night the weather turned very cold, and our poor, tired fellows lay close to the fires. I have to laugh yet to think of poor Williamson's sky-rocket feat. He was lying close to a fire, and as I passed about midnight I saw that his coat-tail was on fire, and called him somewhat hurriedly from a sound sleep. He started up and rushed wildly through the woods, the fiery tail streaming out behind, and for awhile all efforts to stop him were futile, but we finally succeeded in capturing him, extinguishing the fire with the loss of one skirt of his coat. He afterwards cut off the other skirt and made it more *uniform*.

The following morning we took up our march in the face of a storm of sleet, and we had to stop after a few hours, the sleet being so blinding that our mules could not make headway, besides the road being frozen and slippery. We took shelter in an old deserted farm-house only a few miles from our rendezvous on the Blackwater, once, doubtless, the happy home of some Southern family, now changed into the rude scenes of a soldiers' bivouac.

While resting and "thawing out" here by the warmth of bright fires in big fireplaces, impatiently awaiting the breaking up of the storm and anxious to continue our journey, a young man in gray uniform came in and informed us that our plan had been betrayed and that Lewis was at the ford to meet us, according to promise, but accompanied by a regiment of Federals lying in ambush and awaiting our arrival, when they were to give us a warm reception. Had it not been for the storm and our having to take shelter we would have marched into the net spread for us, and most likely all have been killed, or suffered such other *worse* punishment as a court-martial should inflict.

This young man had been a prisoner of war at Fort Monroe, and from his window heard the conversation between Lewis and the Yan-

kee officer, in which the former betrayed us, and the plan to capture the whole party, and having perfected his plans of escape, resolved to put them in execution that night, and, if possible, frustrate his designs by giving us information of his treachery.

After a hurried council of war it was decided that we should go back about a mile and find a hiding place in the woods, efface our tracks, and remain concealed, while Lieutenant Read should make a reconnoissance to satisfy himself that things were as bad as had been reported, and if indeed we would have to return to Richmond without accomplishing our object. Accordingly we hitched up and filed out into the road and took it back, and when we thought we had gone a safe distance turned into the woods and camped—Read taking leave of us, disguised, and saying he would rejoin us the next day, when if he did not by sunset we were to conclude he was captured and make our way back to Richmond. The night passed drearily away, the weather being very cold and we afraid to make fires for fear of exposing our situation should they be already on the hunt for us, as we had no doubt they would be as soon as they discovered we were not going into their trap, and the following day, though but a short winter one, seemed endless, so great was our anxiety for our leader, who had thrust his head into the lion's jaws. At length, about 4 P. M., Read made his appearance in camp, cool and collected as ever, and told us that what we had heard was true, and gave orders to hitch up, form line, and retreat. The enemy's cavalry was already scouring the country in search us and every road of retreat was guarded. We marched by night, avoiding main roads, and during the following day halted and concealed ourselves in the woods.

Headed off at one turn, we took another and pursued our way, resolved to sell our lives dearly, should the enemy fall upon us. Every path now seemed guarded, and our retreat apparently cut off, when an old gentleman in citizens clothes and a "stove-pipe," hat on, who had joined us as guide, determined to take us through the water of the Appomattox, and thus "take roundings" on them. There was a horse-shoe bend in the river, which, by fording, we could pass through between their pickets and reach our picket-lines. This was decided upon, and our guide lead off and marched us to the ford. It was not a pleasant prospect, that of taking water with the thermometer hanging around freezing point, but it was better than falling in the hands of Yankees, so of the two evils we chose the least. My teeth chatter yet to think of that cold wade through water waist deep, covered with a thin coat of ice, but we passed it success-

fully, wagons and all, and then double-quickened to keep from freezing; our clothes freezing stiff on us as we came out of the water.

We had now the inside track of our pursuers, and leaving them waiting for us to march up one of the many roads they had so well guarded, made our way back towards our lines, which we reached safely without loss of a man, wagon or mule.

The results accomplished by this expedition were nothing, but I have thought it worthy of a place in history, because of the effort. Of the hardships of such a trip only those who have experienced them can judge, and I will not even attempt to paint those we encountered. Our flag waved in the James river two months after the events I have endeavored to describe, but of the hundred and one men who composed this expedition, fully seventy-five were in the Naval Hospital, in Richmond, suffering from the effects of their Winter march, on the sad day on which we turned our backs upon that city.
