Mrs. Schuyler Crowninshield.

As Told by an Old Salt

By Mrs. Schuyler-Crowninshield

How a United States Captain Tried to Steal a Confederate General—An Interesting Event of 1864 When Lieut. Cushing was Commanding the Monticello, a Plucky Little Craft with a Plucky Young Captain—The Wife of a Rear Admiral Tells the Story.

(Copyright, by Joseph B. Bowles.)

(Mrs. Schuyler Crowninshield, wife of Rear Admiral Crowninshield, by reason of her talents, is quite as well known to the public as is the distinguished naval officer whose name she bears. Following the success of her earlier books Mrs. Crowninshield has won still wider recognition in the literary field by her "The Archbishop and the Lady," and its attractive sequel, "Valencia's Garden.")

"When you said, 'Sir, you'd like to have me spin ye a yarn,' I really couldn't believe my ears. That any one should want to hear the maunderings of an old salt like me would never have entered into my calculations.

"You asked me what heroic deeds I'd done, and if I couldn't tell you some of 'em, an' I've been layin' awake nights since that and ponderin' and ruminatin' in the daytime as I smoked my pipe, and wonderin' what I could tell you, but Lord bless your soul! I never did a heroic deed in my whole life! As I was tryin' to think up somethin', just to show you that I would like to please you, it suddenly came to my mind that I could tell you of a heroic deed of somebody else's, and that would be much better worth hearin' about than anythin' I ever dope. And if you'll listen, sir, I guess when I get through you'll say that nothin' that I could tell would prove more for man's dash, courage or love of adventure.

"The man I speak of was Lieut. William Cushing. God forgive me for calling him just a man. A gentleman, every inch of him! An officer, every inch of him! And a daredevil, flesh, blood, mind, heart and soul! Now, I happened to be shipmates with Lieut. Cushing when he commanded the Monticello in 1864. Shipmates? You think he wouldn't like me saying so? Bless your soul! An officer and a gentleman's never too high and mighty to speak to an old sailor who's weathered danger with him, nor to call him 'old shipmate' when he meets him ashore after a cruise is up.

"At sea it's a different matter; discipline must be maintained, and I'll know better than even to hint that an officer should treat me familiarly, while we were actin' in our relative positions of officer and man. Why, I met the lieutenant after the last fight we was in together and he patted me on the back as friendly as you please, and he handed me the loan I asked of him, just as if he owed it to me, though, God forgive me, the debt was on the other side of the pair of us.

"Well, sir, to get down to my story, Lieut. Cushing was commanding the Monticello in February, '64, and, of course, he was her cap'n. I won't go into the hackneyed talk of 'how we all loved him.' Do you know how we did love him? Just 24, as I'm a livin' sinner.

"For some time we hadn't found anything to do, and the days had hung rather heavy on our hands. We was always lookin' out for somethin', to turn up, but though we were under way and at anchor, going in close and drawing off again, dodging around Frying Pan shoals and steaming up and down off Fort Fisher, and New Inlet, those wretched blockade runners would douse the glim and slip by us in the night, over and over.

"The Monticello was not a very big boat, but she was plucky, and her commander was a match for her. One day I noticed there seemed to be something going on. Preparations seemed to be making for a landing party.

First we saw the old man get in the gig and pull over to the flagship, askin' permission, maybe, and then, along about night, I saw that there seemed to be some sort of consultation and talk among the officers. I asked the signal quartermaster what was up, and he answered me politely that I could go and ask the cap'n. Then I asked the orderly who was round the cabin door to run errands and send messages. He told me to go right in the cabin and ask the cap'n, and probably he'd tell me all about it. Then I asked an afterguard-sweeper what all the rumpus was, and he said he was darned if he knew, but he thought they was settin' ready to go a-fishin'. Well, I felt pretty well snubbed, and by an afterguard-sweeper, too!

"So I watched and waited and pretended I had work to do around the cabin. I went aft and hung around the port. I heard Cap'n Cushing talking with some of his officers, and I found that they were goin' somewhere, but from their talk I judged that if they were goin' a-fishin' it must be for something as big as a whale or a sea serpent. One of the officers said:

"'Cap'n, I wish you'd let me take charge of the expedition.'

"'Who would look out for the ship?' asked the old man.

"'Why, pardon me, cap'n, I could go in your place.'

"Then I heard Cap'n Cushing laugh—the sort of laugh that says: 'I guess you don't know me.'

"'No, no,' said the cap'n. 'You have your work to do here. It's a great deal harder to stay behind, and that's why I choose you to do it. I know I'm selfish, but I always was in a case like this, and you'll just have to put up with it. Orderly!'

"I heard the orderly come running aft.

"'Tell Acting Ensign Jones that I wish to speak with him, and ask Acting Master's Mate Howorth to come into the cabin.'

"Then I knew that he was in for something desperate, for those were two as plucky officers as we had on board the old Monticello. I couldn't really say with justice that they were the most plucky, for there wasn't a pin's point, it seemed to me, to choose between any of 'em.

"Well, I stood and listened. Of course I knew it wasn't right, but I was bound to find out what they were up to. I heard the officer who had been urgin' that he might go along rise and sigh and go out of the door. Later, when I crept back to my station, I saw him walkin' up and down, up and down and lookin' on the deck and shakin' his head, and I heard him say: 'Just my luck! Just my luck!' From this you can see how many skeery ones there was in the ship.

"In a moment Acting Ensign Jones was in the cabin, and shortly after Mr. Howorth followed him. The ensign was out of breath.

"'O, cap'n,' he said, 'I hope you're going to take me.'

"'Take you where?' asked the old man. I could hear the smile in his voice.

"'Wherever you're going, cap'n. I know something's up, sir. I can't say what—I'll—do, but, I'll—I'll—'

"There was silence. I peeked in through the port. There was Mr. Howorth standin', his mouth working sideways like a dinger in the trough of the sea, and actually, if you'll believe me, his eyes were full of tears. He might have known he was goin', and cryin'. Dang me, if I didn't believe I should boo-hoo over the rail, too, if somehow or other I didn't get onto that boat.

"'Of course, you're going,' said the cap'n, 'and now whom shall we take along?'

"'The men's names were discussed. There's so and so, and there's so and so. Finally they mentioned me. My heart actually stopped beating.

"'Well, they're all good fellows,' said the old man.

"'Suppose we call for volunteers,' said one of the officers.

"'They'd all volunteer, every man Jack of 'em,' said the old man. 'No, I shall have to select some. The trouble is that those on board will feel it a personal matter if they are left behind.'

"I nearly put my head into the port and shouted: 'Take me!' but I knew that such a breach of discipline would land me in the brig, with me going ashore for a week, perhaps, so I crept back to the fo'c'sle and waited.

"By and by I saw the bos'n's mate come aft and call a man from below. Then he called another and another. But I didn't hear my name. As each man's name was spoken the rest looked down-hearted enough, but kept their eyes fixed on the bos'n's mate, hoping their's would be the next name. At last all were called. Then the bos'n's mate began to walk away, the men following him.

"'Oh!' 'I said, 'is that all?'

"'That's all, my lad,' said the master-at-arms.

"I tailed on to the line and walked up with the others. That's where I considered myself just a leetle smarter than the rest of 'em. The men were marched up to the mast, where the cap'n and the first lieutenant stood.

"'My men,' said the cap'n, 'I'm going ashore on a rather dangerous expedition to-night. Do you want to go?'

"'Aye, aye, sir,' said every man, and I among them.

"'You had you to come, youngster?' said the bos'n's mate to me.

"'Don't send me back,' said I. 'If you won't, I'll give you all my tobacco for months to come.'

"'You can't bribe me,' said the bos'n's mate. 'You haven't got your eyes open yet. Go back to your quarters.'

"What is that, bos'n's mate?' said the old man.

"'I'm only telling him that he isn't needed, sir,' said he. 'We have all that you called for. I've chosen the biggest and oldest and those who have had the most experience.'

"'May I speak to the cap'n?' said I.

"'No; get back to your—'

"'What is it, my lad?' asked the cap'n.

"'I just gave one glance at the bos'n's mate. Now, wasn't that like him—our cap'n, I mean? I can see him now, hardly more than a lad, looking at me as if he was 50.

"'Let him go!' Oh, do please, sir, let me. Oh, do! Oh, do!' Oh, sir, please, cap'n, sir!'

"The cap'n laughed. 'The spirit of the ship!' he said.

"'If it was the spirit of the ship, I knew who got it there.

"'Have we room for one more, bos'n?' asked the cap'n, turning to where the bos'n was ordering the boats lowered.

"'Yes, sir,' said the bos'n, 'if he'll stow himself in the bows.'

"'Very well, then, my man,' said the cap'n.

"While the boats were being lowered I ran below just to tell my gun's crew and crow over the rest of 'em, and was on deck again quicker than you could say Jack Robinson.

"We got over the side and stowed ourselves away. There were two boats, three officers and 20 men, and perhaps because I was so young the cap'n ordered me to get into his boat. None of us knew what the old man was up to, but we had heard the word Smithville, and we knew that Gen. Herbert's headquarters were there, and the report said that there was about a thousand men under guard in the barracks. We didn't right understand it, but we knew it was all right if Cap'n Cushing said it was.

"I can tell you we were as quiet as mice as we passed the forts at the mouth of the river and rowed quietly up to the town. As we passed the forts a steamer was coming down the river. Her lights were extinguished, but we heard her paddle wheels and the throb of her engines, and presently the black mass loomed up just ahead of us. I felt the boat give a sudden lurch, as the cap'n ported his helm to get out of the way of the great thing which would have run us down as easily as I could crush a fly. When we had steered clear of her I heard the old man say: 'That was the Scotia. I meant to try her first if she had been at the wharf, but it would have been foolhardy while she was under way, and perhaps would have separated us from the other boat. I should like very much to call upon the captain of the Scotia. I shall try it, I think, when she returns.'

"The Scotia was a blockade runner which we had often hoped to catch and burn. And now that she was out of the way, I wondered what plan our commanding officer had in his head. As we pulled ashore I saw a big building looming up, which some one said was the hotel. There were one or two lights in it, and I wondered if it was full of confederate officers and soldiers, and if our captain expected to capture 'em with two officers and 20 men, all told.

"We got out of the boats, and the cap'n ordered the men to hide themselves under the bank. Some of us stayed to confer with him and you may be sure I didn't stay behind if there was going to be fun. I was going in for it. The first thing we did was to capture some negroes who were at the sail works.

"'Now, look here, cap'n ask: 'Where is Gen. Herbert?' to which the men replied: 'Right up dah, sah, in de hotel, sah!'

"Cap'n Cushing then left some of our men to guard the boats. He said: 'I don't want too many. They would hinder me. I'll take you with me, Jones, and you, Howorth, and one seaman.' He chose, of course, a brawny old fellow who had been with him in various expeditions, but though I was not asked to accompany 'em, I crept along after, for I meant to be in it now, as I told you, if there was to be any fun. The others walked quietly up through the garden, and I followed. The first thing I heard was a window being pushed up gently. I stepped upon the piazza and looked into the room. Cap'n Cushing was already in the room and so were Mr. Jones and Mr. Howorth. There was a lamp burning low. A figure rose up in the bed.

"'Bos'n's thief!' said a voice.

"'Gen. Herbert, you may as well get up and come with us,' said Cap'n Cushing.

"'I am not Gen. Herbert,' said the man in the bed.

"'Not Gen. Herbert? Who are you, then?' said the old man, and pretty sharply, too. Perhaps you can imagine the tone in which Cap'n Cushing said this. I never heard a voice so full of disappointment in all my life.

"'I am the chief of the engineer forces here.'

"'Where is Gen. Herbert?'

"'He has gone to Wilmington,' said the engineer.

"'Gone to Wilmington!' echoed Cap'n Cushing. 'Well, if we can't find the principal we will have to take one of his accessories. What to take your name, sir?'

"'Capt. Reilly, at your service.'

"'Very well, captain. Get up, if you please, and dress, for you must go with us.'

"Just here there was a rush of some one down the stairs outside the door. There was a dash at the window and a quiet scuffle began and a general set-to, and then I saw some one jump off the end of the veranda and run out into the garden. I thought it might be the general, and I sprang out after the fleeing figure, but I looked in vain. I could see no one, the night was so dark. I heard only a rustling among the trees and shrubs and then the person dashed away into the woods near the house. I thought of pursuing him, but I now heard the rest of my party passing through the garden and out of the gate, and thinking that anything else that I could do would only annoy and delay 'em, and that the person who had dashed out of the window had gone to give the alarm and turn out the whole thousand soldiers upon us, I decided to follow the old man and the officers.

I found out afterward that the person who had run away was the adjutant general, and he was so flabbergasted at being waked up with the noise that he really took to the woods and forgot to give the alarm.

"But, now, just think of a youngster like Cap'n Cushing starting on an expedition with only two boats and 20 men, rowing in past the forts, landing, capturing prisoners and going into the very threshold of the enemy with the purpose of capturing the general commanding. I thought of it as I walked down to the boats and I could hardly believe that had been the cause of our expedition. We went back to the boats and got silently in. The prisoner was, you may be sure, well guarded, with a pistol at his head. Had he cried out it might have been bad for us, but worse for him, for he would have dropped dead in his tracks before we took to our boats.

"When it comes to deliberately sacrificing your life for your country where nothing much is to be gained, a man hesitates. The prisoner hesitated, and was saved. The sentry on the wharf was not 50 yards away from us, and we were about 50 yards from the Smithville fort. They were brave men, of course. No one ever belittled our enemy of the confederate states, but I think it was only that it never occurred to them how daring and dash Cushing possessed that the place was not better guarded. We got silently into our boats and floated down the river.

"The men all pulled quietly and steadily. Not a word was spoken, but suddenly a light flashed out from Fort Caswell. A signal light! Ah, then they had discovered us? They had at least discovered that strange boats were in the harbor, and their shore patrol, but wide of the mark. We heard 'em splashing in the distance, but not one came near us. I heard the cap'n say that the papers he captured were not important, but he had the engineer officer in safe keeping and could get him on the first opportunity to Acting Rear Admiral Lee, at Hampton Roads, Virginia.

"Now, it happened, that a short time after this some prisoners were to be exchanged, and I, a boy, and, as I've said, a daredevil, and, I'm ashamed to say, conceited as well, was put in charge of Gen. Herbert. I'll admit that I was a bit conceited over the matter, for I felt that the exchange of prisoners was a very important affair, and that I was being intrusted with a very important prisoner. I was to take him to Fortress Monroe, and I was to be in charge of him all the way. I was to have a boat to myself, and I was to be treated with the greatest consideration. I was to have my meals with the general, and I was to be responsible for his safety. I was to see that he had no communication with any one, and I was to see that he did not escape.