

THE ALABAMA HISTORICAL QUARTERLY

Vol. XXXVIII

SUMMER, 1976

No. 2

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Published by the
ALABAMA STATE DEPARTMENT
OF ARCHIVES AND HISTORY
Montgomery, Alabama

SKINNER PRINTING COMPANY
INDUSTRIAL TERMINAL
MONTGOMERY, ALABAMA

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LANGUAGE AND COMIC MOTIFS IN JOHNSON JONES HOOPER'S *SIMON SUGGS*

by

John Rachal

In Johnson Jones Hooper's *Adventures of Captain Simon Suggs*, Hooper has created a character whose language is as realistic and earthy as the narrator's is dignified and Addisonian. This contrast is a fundamental aspect of the much-discussed frame device common in early Southern humor. It is Simon's language, rather than his narrator's, that usually gets the laughs, and that, coupled with comic irony and Hooper's use of some established but not outworn comic motifs, is part of the essence of his humor.

Simon, the quintessential backwoods con-man, almost instinctively chooses imagery that tends toward the animalistic and the card game metaphor. He uses to great advantage similes such as "like a tick onder a cow's belly," "I'd see him as deep in hell as a pigeon could fly in a fortnight" (p. 43), and, in "The Muscadine Story," "Anybody would think 'twas as hard to git money from me as 'tis for a man to draw a headless tenpenny nail out'n an oak post with his teeth" (p. 159). Of his metaphors, two of the best are "prudence is the stob I fasten the grapevine of my cunnoo to" (p. 42) and "we have chewed the cud of this matter" (p. 5). Though none of the *Simon Suggs* adventures could be considered tall tales in the Davy Crockett tradition, Hooper does effectively use exaggeration, for example, "Strip, and I'll whip as much *dog* out of you as'll make a full pack of hounds!" (p. 170), "I'd cut the big vein of my neck before I'd *ever* desert sich a friend" (p. 45), and "I'd wade to my ears in blood, to fight by *that* man's side" (p. 45-6). In an unpublished thesis, Harry West has classified Hooper's metaphors and similes as thirty-nine percent "animal" and twenty-one "farm," the rest being miscellaneous, but with an emphasis on gambling. Simon also frequently manages to lower the honorable and even reverent subjects to a level aptly fitting

¹Johnson Jones Hooper, *Adventures of Captain Simon Suggs, Late of the Tallapoosa Volunteers* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina, 1968), 83. Subsequent page references to *Simon Suggs* are to this edition and are given in the text.

his own unprincipled character: "‘Ah yes, *honesty*, HONESTY’S the stake that Simon Suggs will ALLERS tie to! What’s a man without his inteegerty?’" (p. 37) and, in a similar just mentioned, metaphor, "‘Yes’ — interrupted Suggs — ‘prudence is the stob I fasten the grape-vine of *my* cunnoo to’" (p. 42). Throughout the camp-meeting chapter Simon speaks of the serious subject of soul-saving in the card-game metaphor. Of course, Simon’s victims fail to see the subtle disparagement of the sentiments they supposedly hold dear; ironically they themselves perceive them in rather crass terms. Similarly, despite the lack of a pejorative metaphor, Simon’s indulgence in the sophisticated, authoritative, and official language of the military is ironic and hardly compliments the army in view of the character of the speaker:

“Whares, Betsy Haycock were brought up afore us, bein’ charged with infringin’ the rules of war by crossin’ of the lines agin orders, and Fort Suggs bein’ under martial law at the time, and likewise ecknowledged she was guilty, Tharfore we have tried her eccordin to said rules of war, and condemns her to be baggonetted to deth in one hour from this time, witness our hands and seals.” (p. 98)

Just as the narrator occasionally lowers his speech to sound like Simon’s (as in “Captain Suggs is human, and ‘as sich’ is liable to err, but it isn’t often that he can be ‘throwed’ by ordinary men” [p. 107]), Simon sometimes attempts to raise his level of speech to sound like the narrator’s. In this “sophisticated” speech of Simon’s, however, the voice of the backwoodsman rings noticeably louder. It is through this realistic language that the “Southwestern” humorists were both innovative and influential on later writers, not the least of whom was Mark Twain.

Along with the humorous language, there are a number of motifs which occur in the novel, some more than once, and which also invariably contribute to the humor. Already briefly mentioned is the recurrent gambling motif. The importance of card games in Southwestern life generally accounts for this pervasive motif in Southwestern humor. George Washington Harris’ Sut Lovingood asserts that along with swapping “hosses

wif fools," men were supposed, almost by nature, to "play short kerds." Gambling was custom-made for the rogue since, if he was sufficiently crafty, it afforded him the opportunity of gain with little risk. Simon, being the supreme rogue that he is, begins his card playing early. In the first chapter young Simon is gambling with (and cheating) a slave-boy, and when his father attempts to punish him, Simon cleverly entices his father into a bet concerning Simon's ability to perform a card trick. Hooper effectively personifies the cards as the elder Suggs is attempting to shuffle them:

Restive *kings* and *queens* jumped from his hands, or obstinately refused to slide into the company of the rest of the pack. Occasionally a sprightly *knave* would insist on *facing* his neighbor; or pressing his edge against another's, half double himself up, and then skip away. But elder Jed'diah perserveringly continued his attempts to subdue the refractory, while heavy drops burst from his forehead, and ran down his cheeks.

(p. 22)

Further, the use of gambling language which fails to be understood or correctly interpreted by the speaker's audience occurs at least twice in the novel. In the first chapter, Reverend Suggs, who "had only a vague idea of the pasteboard abomination called *cards*," whips Bill the slave-boy with a hickory stick and then asks Simon about the card he had previously been sitting on:

"I had it under my leg, thar, to make it on Bill, the first time it come trumps," was the ready reply.

"What's trumps?" asked Mr. Suggs, with a view of arriving at the import of the word.

"Nothin' a'n't trumps *now*," said Simon, who misapprehended his father's meaning — "but *clubs* was, when you came along and busted up the game."

A part of this answer was Greek to the Reverend Mr. Suggs, but a portion of it was full of meaning.

(p. 13)

Pascal Covici points out along the same line that the gambling language is ingenuously misinterpreted in the camp-meeting chapter. Having convinced the congregation that he has been converted, Simon says, "No matter what sort of hand you've got . . . take stock! Here am I . . . come in on narry a pair and won a pile!" (p. 122). The hearers interpret "narry a pair" as his previous sinful life and "won a pile" as the joy of his new-found salvation, whereas Simon and the reader see that the "pile" is coming from the collection plate "on the strength of his pretended conversion, [i.e.,] his bluff 'hand' with 'narry a pair' in it."² The former episode is remarkably parallel to the hilarious meeting of Scotty Briggs and the minister in Twain's *Roughing It* in that both scenes deal with ministers, both use the card-game lingo, and both, at least initially, involve a mutual failure to communicate.

The gambling motif recurs briefly as a pastime at Fort Suggs, while in the fifth chapter, in which Simon impersonates General Witherspoon, the entire plot revolves around Simon's confrontation with the professional card shark. Although Simon seems to lose against the gambler, the real victim is the shark himself who accepts Simon's unauthorized offer of thirty of "the finest hogs of General Witherspoon's uncommonly fine drove." This is a good example, along with the Reverend Bela Bugg episode, of the cheater with whom we are not sympathetic getting his due. Besides the chapters in which gambling or the gambling metaphor is important, the gambling motif is emphasized in that Hooper points out that Simon's greatest weakness, his "*Achilles heel*, as one might say," is his belief that he can whip the "tiger," that is, "the elegant man dealing out the cards" from the Faro Bank. That Simon's only weakness is this obsession for beating the tiger is, without the frequent examples, indicative of the importance of the gambling motif.

As common as the gambling motif is the "drinking" motif. Drinking played a large part in Southwestern life if *Simon Suggs* is any indication. As early as the seventh page Hooper speaks of the brilliant glow of the Captain's eye whenever he is in the vicinity of "spiritous liquors." At one point Simon pauses on his hurried way to meet the Tiger in order to admire the win-

²Pascal Covici, *Mark Twain's Humor: The Image of a World* (Dallas, 1962), 21.

dow of a drug store filled with "koniac," "old peach," "Tennessee" and "rot-gut." But in a noble demonstration of self-control Simon observes, "if I warn't goin' to run agin the bank, I'd sample of it, too, I reether expect. But it don't do for a man to sperrets much when he's pursuin' the beast" (p. 49). Throughout the Witherspoon chapter drinking acts as a background, culminating in Simon's generous gift of two baskets of champagne for the crowd, though of course *he* never troubles with the bill. In the Fort Suggs chapters, drinking again becomes a major pastime. Simon gets himself elected Captain by speaking of the need for "some sober, stiddy feller" while ironically drinking from his tumbler. In fact, the "chronometrical standard in use at Fort Suggs" (p. 91) was which "drink-time" it was — whether first, second, third or whichever.

Another motif, though less frequent, is that of anti-intellectualism or, as Hooper might have seen it, anti-culture. Walter Blair, recognizing the importance of Hooper's aristocratic Southern-gentleman viewpoint, writes, "Hooper the Southerner . . . sneered not only at his hero Suggs' shifty ways but also at his belief that mother wit was better than anything out of books. He obviously assumed that his readers would sneer with him."³ This is, in the main, true; Hooper does sneer at his hero. But there is a certain ambivalence in that the flawed nature of Simon's victims has the effect of enlisting the reader's sympathy and even occasional admiration for Simon. Perhaps the key to understanding this ambivalence is that our sympathy with Simon is relative to the depravity, foolishness, and pomposness of his victims, whereas on any more "absolute" scale of virtue Simon would be well worth sneering at. At any rate, it is certain that the author was unsympathetic with Simon's view of "book-larnin'" and culture if only because of the author's own literary interests and his library. Certainly there is a strong anti-intellectual element that is part of the tradition of horse-sense (common sense, mother-wit) American humor, and Simon fits this tradition perfectly when he rather heatedly expounds to himself:

"H-ll and scissors! Who ever seed the like of the books! Aint thar a pile! Do wonder what sort of

³Walter Blair, *Horse Sense in American Humor* (New York, 1962), 104-5.

a office them fellers in thar keeps, makes 'em want so many! They don't read 'em *all*, I judge! Well mother-wit kin beat book-larnin', at any game! Thar's 'squire Hadenskelt up home, he's got two cart-loads of law books — tho' that's no tech to this feller's — and here's what knocked a fifty outen him once, at short cards, afore a right smart, active sheep could flop his tail *ary* time; and kin do it agin, whenever he gits over his shyness! Human natur' and the human family is *my* books, and I've never seed many but what I could hold my own with. Let me git one o' these book-larnt fellers over a bottle of 'old corn,' and a handful of the dokkyments, and I'm d-d apt to get what he knows, and in a ginral way gives him a wrinkle into the bargain! Books aint fitten for nothin' but jist to give to child'en goin' to school, to keep em outen mischief. As old Jed'diah used to say, book-larnin spiles a man if he's got mother-wit and if he aint got that it don't do him no good--." (pp. 49-50)

Simon's comment about books being only good for keeping children out of mischief exemplifies the view of many parents that schoolmasters were little more than a necessary evil. Schoolteachers also get rough treatment in Longstreet, Baldwin, and of course Twain's *Tom Sawyer*, while Simon's general diatribe against academia is echoed by William T. Thompson's Major Jones in *Major Jones' Chronicles of Pineville* and Harris' Sut Lovingood in *Sut Lovingood Tales*.

There are a number of other motifs in Hooper's humor that at least deserve mention. The camp-meeting scene is related to other confrontations between rogues and clergymen going back as far as *Lazarillo de Tormes*, and precisely the same can be said of Simon's opening episode with his father, the Reverend Suggs. These scenes also have an American ancestor in *Modern Chivalry*, and Twain's camp-meeting in *Huckleberry Finn* is a direct descendant of Hooper's chapter. Other motifs that were more contemporary with Hooper's humor included that of the ugly man, which was essentially a tall tale centered around a man's fortunes and misfortunes due to his ugliness, a trait in which he took a rather bizarre pride. Quite likely Hooper's story "A Night at the Ugly Man's" is the epitome of this motif, but

it is at least worth noting that Simon in *Simon Suggs* is no paragon of beauty:

His head is somewhat large. . . . His forehead is divided into a couple of very acute triangles, the base of each of which is an eyebrow, lightly defined, and seeming to owe its scantiness to the depilatory assistance of a pair of tweezers. Beneath these almost shrubless cliffs, a pair of eyes with light-grey pupils and variegated whites, dance and twinkle in an aqueous humor which is constantly distilling from the corners. Lids without lashes complete the optical apparatus of Captain Suggs. . . . The nose we find in the neighborhood of these eyes, is long and low, with an extremity of singular acuteness, overhanging the subjacent mouth. . . . But the mouth of Captain Suggs is his great feature, and measures about four inches horizontally. . . . All these facial beauties are supported by a long and skinny, but muscular neck. (pp. 6-7)

It is possible, in keeping with the satire, to see something of Andrew Jackson here, or possibly Hooper himself, who had a reputation for ugliness in his own right. Other motifs Hooper uses include that of the dirt-eater, and although the most famous example is Longstreet's Ransy Sniffle, it is interesting that Hooper's "Yaller Legs," though not a particularly well-developed character, is the only character in *Simon Suggs* who sees Simon for what he really is — a con man. What this fact suggests, if anything, is unclear, but perhaps as an outcast from society the dirt-eater might possess a more realistic viewpoint on that society, its individuals, and its hypocrisy. A final motif Hooper uses is that of the horse-swap, which is almost ubiquitous in Southwestern humor, though the more famous examples are in Longstreet's *Georgia Scenes* and Twain's *Roughing It*.

Though not a motif, comic irony is a language-related aspect of Hooper's humor that deserves mention. Pervading the book, at least regarding its political point, is the fact that as a campaign biography it should reveal the virtues of the subject and his fitness for office; instead it reveals the amorality and general unfitness for office of the hero. More specific examples

of irony are numerous; for example when the candidate for bank director assumes that Simon is the legislator travelling incognito, he says in a cleverly understanding fashion, "There are many reasons why gentlemen of distinction should at times desire to travel without being known," to which Simon mentally replies, "'I'll be d--d if thar ain't!" (p. 45). Or there is Simon's seeming suspicion of James Peyton's claim to be Suggs' nephew: "'All very will, Mr. Jeems Peyton, but as this little world of owrn is tolloble d--d full of rascally impostory; and gentlemen of my — that is to say — you see — persons that have got somethin', is apt to be tuk in, it stands a man in hand to be a leetle perticler'" (p. 55). Undoubtedly as humorous as any example of the book's ironies, though, is the obvious ability of Simon to impress his victims with his honesty. After the candidate for bank director asks Simon to use his supposed influence on the former's behalf, Simon replies "with an almost tragic air":

"Look me in the eye!"

The candidate looked steadily, for two seconds, in Simon's tearful eye.

"You see honesty thar — don't you?"

"I do!" said the candidate with emotion. (p. 46)

Of course, not once does Simon perform a thoroughly honest act throughout the novel. Exactly the same kind of irony is seen in his frequent weeping — Simon never cries from real emotion — and from his "magnanimity" — his seeming sacrifices only disguise his gain and endear him to the victims who are so foolishly suckered in.

RICHMOND P. HOBSON AND THE SINKING
OF THE *MERRIMAC*

by

Walter E. Pittman, Jr.

The Spanish American War was the last war of heroes. The "bully little war" rode on a wave of public approval and enthusiasm that glorified the fighting man lucky enough to catch the eye of newspaper reporters. It had been a long time since the Civil War; the horrors had been long forgotten and the nation hungered for new heroes. Americans eagerly followed the little war's daily progress in their newspapers, vicariously living the adventures of which they read. Obscure warriors, professional and amateur, were suddenly catapulted to fame and fortune by the magic of newsprint. Sampson, Wheeler, Schley, Dewey, and Roosevelt were all rewarded for their successful exploits with public adulation and went onto build impressive careers based upon their war-won successes. Yet, at the time, it was a military failure that most captured the public's fancy, for Lieutenant Richmond Pearson Hobson and his tiny crew failed in their efforts to scuttle the collier *Merrimac* across Santiago harbor entrance and trap the Spanish fleet within. Nevertheless, the incident made an international hero of Hobson and propelled the Alabamian into national politics.

Fleet is perhaps too strong a word to use to describe the Spanish naval forces in the Caribbean, for the force under Admiral Pascual Cervera y Topete consisted of three modern torpedo boat destroyers, three dilapidated armored cruisers (*Maria Theresa*, *Reina Mercedes* and *Oquendo*) and one new armored cruiser (*Cristobol Colon*) which still lacked its main battery. Admiral Cervera had warned his government of the inevitable fate awaiting his weak force of ramshackle vessels supplied with defective ammunition, but Spanish honor had to be served. On April 29, 1898, the little squadron sailed from the Cape Verde Islands and into history at six knots.¹

¹Winfield Scott Schley, *Forty-Five Years Under The Flag* (New York, 1904) 273-385; Robley B. Evans, *A Sailors Log* (n.p., n.d.), 426-432; A. G. M. Azov, *Signal 250!*; *The Sea Fight off Santiago* (New York, 1964), 72-104; Walter Millis, *The Martial Spirit* (Cambridge, Mass., 1931), 228-239.

Concentrating to meet Cervera, the American naval forces were vastly more powerful. Four new battleships, the *Oregon*, *Indiana*, *Massachusetts* and *Iowa*, and one older, the *Texas*, awaited. The fast armored cruisers, *New York* and *Brooklyn*, and the armed yacht *Gloucester*, besides numerous scout cruisers, auxiliaries, and press boats also eagerly sought sight of Spanish masts. But Cervera won the first round; he reached Cuba safely despite his lack of charts of American waters and despite the efforts of the United States Navy.

While Cervera had been plodding across the Atlantic, the American Navy had been engaged in an incredible series of wild goose chases. Public opinion, panicking at the prospect of Spanish men-of-war sailing up every body of water capable of floating a dinghy, forced the government to disperse its naval forces all along the East Coast. The frightened citizens and their political leaders demanded protection — tangible protection that they could actually see in their own harbors. Scattered, the naval forces were nearly useless. But public opinion had to be served. The Navy finally distributed enough obsolete monitors and reserve ships along the coastline to free Commodore Winfield Scott Schley's "Flying Squadron" for offensive operations and at the same time to calm the civilian hysteria. But Schley was not allowed to leave Hampton Roads until Cervera had been definitely reported in West Indian waters. Even then, confusion within the American command resulted in neither Santiago nor Havana being adequately patrolled and Cervera slipped into Santiago unscathed and undetected on May 19, 1898. Although clearly visible from outside the harbor, Cervera's squadron was not discovered by Commodore Schley's force until May 29. Even then, the dilatory American commander did nothing until May 31, when he undertook a half-hearted bombardment of the *Cristobal Colon* from outside effective range. Admiral Sampson arrived and took command the same day.²

The problems facing Sampson were immense. The Spanish fleet was anchored in the large mushroom shaped harbor of Santiago where it was protected by the narrow harbor entrance through which the channel wound its tortuous course under dominating cliffs. To enhance the natural obstacles,

²Schley, *Forty-Five Years Under the Flag*, 263-283; Evans, *A Sailor's Log*, 430-432.

heavy fortification and electrically detonated mines had been emplaced by the Spanish. There were not enough mines or modern artillery, but Santiago Harbor was a formidable military obstacle and the Americans were unaware of the Spanish weaknesses.³

Even before leaving Key West, Admiral Sampson began planning to neutralize Cervera's fleet. For despite its weakness the Spanish force with its superior squadron speed could possibly elude the superior American forces if Cervera chose to sorty. Arriving off Santiago, Sampson established a close blockade of the harbor entrance. At night the battleships illuminated the harbor entrance with their searchlights at close range. By day the fleet took on provisions and coal without ever leaving station. But if Cervera could not get out of Santiago, Sampson could not get in, and the resulting stalemate which tied down large American naval forces was unsatisfying to the offensive-minded Americans.⁴

Even before leaving Key West, Sampson began to consider the possibility of bottling up Cervera's force by blocking the entrance to Santiago Harbor. A later investigation ordered by President William H. Taft was unable to determine who deserved credit for originating the idea but it was probably Sampson. The channel was narrow enough and shallow enough that a ship sunk across it could effectively close it and bottle up Cervera's fleet indefinitely. As early as May 31, Sampson ordered Schley to sink the collier *Sterling* in the harbor entrance but the latter failed to do so under the discretionary authority Sampson had given him.⁵ Selecting the collier *Merrimac*, Samp-

³Rear-Admiral Pludderemann, German Navy, "Comments of Rear Admiral Pludderemann," Translated by the Office of Naval Intelligence, *Notes on The Spanish-American War*, No. II, 56th Cong., 1st Sess., Senate Doc. No. 388 (Washington, 1900), 12, 21, 22. Hereafter cited as O.N.I., *War Notes*.

⁴Commodore W. S. Schley to the Secretary of the Navy, June 11, 1898, Navy Department Records, National Archives; William T. Sampson, "Memo Number 15," *ibid.*; William T. Sampson, "The Atlantic Fleet in the Spanish War," *Century*, LVII (April, 1899), 889-899.

⁵Memorandum to William H. Taft, January 10, 1913, William Howard Taft Papers, Library of Congress; Schley, *Forty-Five Years Under The Flag*, 285; Rear Admiral William T. Sampson to the Secretary of the Navy, June 3, 1898, in, "Appendix to the Report of the Chief of the Bureau of Navigation," *Annual Reports of the Navy Department for the Year 1898*, 55th, Cong., 3rd Sess., House Document No. 3 (Washington, 1898), 437.

son ordered Assistant Naval Constructor Richmond Pearson Hobson to begin planning the operation. The selection of the *Merrimac* was probably not entirely fortuitous. For several weeks it had bedeviled fleet operations with chronic engine trouble.⁶

The choice of Hobson was not entirely fortuitous either. Hobson had aggressively sought active service with the Fleet. Trained in France as a naval architect after graduating first in his class at Annapolis, Hobson had been assigned as a Naval Constructor in various capacities and was theoretically not eligible for sea duty. But ambition burned within the young Alabamian. When war came, he had first convinced the Navy Department that a Naval Constructor should accompany the fleet in battle to observe the stability of warships in action. Then he convinced them that he was the obvious one to go. Already Hobson was well known within the service. Scion of an aristocratic Greensboro, Alabama family, Hobson had had a distinguished academic career and a promising naval future. While at Annapolis an unusual situation developed which tells much about Hobson's character. Under the strict honor system of the Academy, he was meticulous in reporting fellow midshipmen for infractions of the rules. As a result, he was ostracized by the student body and it is reported that only one student spoke to him in a period of two years. When his fellow cadets finally tired of their game and offered the hand of friendship, Hobson refused to cooperate and continued to graduation in 1889, proud, lonely, and at the head of his class. His naval career before 1898, included post-graduate work in Europe, instruction at Annapolis, and technical assignments with the Bureau of Ships and various shipyards. Hobson was also sent as a naval observer to the Far East on two occasions. What he saw profoundly affected him and in later years Hobson would emerge as the leading anti-Japanese spokesman in the nation. War with Spain in 1898 offered a chance of glory and excitement and Hobson was quick to take advantage of it. Even before Santiago he had volunteered for several hazardous enterprises that had not come to fruition.⁷

⁶Evans, *A Sailor's Log*, 429; Schley, *Forty-Five Years Under The Flag*, 275.

⁷Walter E. Pittman, Jr., "Richmond P. Hobson, Crusader," Unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Georgia, 1968, 1-8.

Hobson's planning for scuttling the *Merrimac* was complicated by the necessity for speed. Hobson in the *Oregon* arrived off Santiago early June 1. Moon and tide conditions dictated that the best available opportunity would be early June 2, when flood tide would coincide with a period of darkness between moonset and daybreak. A shorter period would be available the next morning. Lack of time and resources required that less than ideal means be used to sink the collier. Hobson finally determined to use ten torpedoes, electrically detonated. Each torpedo (the word torpedo then referred to any underwater explosive) consisted of a normal eight-inch charge of seventy-eight pounds of brown prismatic powder with four pounds of black powder used as a detonator. The charges were to be placed along the port side below the waterline and in a position where they would serve to breach the watertight bulkheads. The charges were to be waterproofed in their own metal tanks with the firing cables and detonators inserted and to be secured by a belt line fore and aft and by a girth line completely around the ship. Hobson figured correctly that the lack of transverse bulkheads would cause the collier to sink upright, thus more effectively blocking the channel and facilitating the crew's escape.⁸

As the *Merrimac's* 333 feet length was barely sufficient to block the 350 to 450 foot channel, it would be necessary to swing the ship across the channel and hold her there. But it was also necessary to approach the entrance at high speed to minimize detection. This meant there was only a short distance available in which to slow, turn and sink the vessel. Hobson's final plan, as approved by Sampson, called for the *Merrimac* to approach the channel at full speed, cut of power outside the entrance and allow the ship's momentum to carry it into the mouth of the harbor. At this point its speed should be about four and one half knots. Then "the helm would be put hard aport" and when the ship began to swing, first the starboard bow-anchor with sixty fathoms of chain would be let to and then the starboard stern-anchor with forty fathoms of chain. Both anchor chains would be laid out on deck and rigged with elastic rope stops to take up as much momentum as possible. The stops, which were short pieces of rope, were tied to the anchor chains at one end and to a heavy hawser at the other. As the

⁸Richmond P. Hobson, *The Sinking of The Merrimac* (New York, 1899), 8-18.

chain was run out it would break each stop in turn but not until a portion of the ship's momentum had been neutralized by the elasticity of the hawser and the stops. Hopefully, the dragging anchors and the elastic stops would slow the ship enough to sink it in the desired location. When the narrowest part of the channel was reached the torpedoes would be fired as the ship turned to starboard and its forward motion would help flood the holes on the port side. Any additional momentum should be neutralized by sticking the ship's nose into the mud on the side of the channel. The crew could then escape by small boat.⁹

Hobson's plan required only a small crew to detonate the torpedoes and release the anchor fastenings. He was in command, having convinced Admiral Sampson that he should take the collier in rather than her skipper, Captain James Miller, who vigorously protested his replacement. The rest of the crew were chosen from volunteers from the fleet. Signals went out from the flagship for volunteers but this plan failed when the entire ship's companies of each ship volunteered. Finally, seven enlisted men were selected to accompany Hobson; George Phillips, Francis Kelly, and Osborn Deignan of the *Merrimac*; George Charette, Daniel Montague and Randolph Clausen of the *New York*; and J. E. Murphy who was elected by the crew of the *Iowa* to represent them. Originally Boat-swain Mullen of the *New York* was selected to go, but he worked himself to exhaustion preparing the *Merrimac* and had to be replaced. Many junior officers, some his former students at Annapolis, begged futilely to accompany Hobson.¹⁰

The preparation of the *Merrimac* proved arduous. Mass confusion reigned on board where stripping parties and work gangs stumbled over one another. Coal had to be shifted, watertight doors removed, charges prepared and anchors rigged. Stripping parties carried off needed supplies and the heat and the normal blockade routine interfered with effective work. It proved impossible to shift the large anchor aft and a lesser one had to be used. The failure to locate an electrical detonating machine proved a more serious problem. Batteries had to be used instead, but there proved to be an insufficient number

⁹*Ibid.*, 21-22.

¹⁰*Ibid.* 40-44, 54-55, 73-74; Evans, *A Sailor's Log*, 439.

of these also. Finally, enough batteries were found to detonate six of the ten charges and the most important ones were selected. The reliability of even these batteries was questionable.¹¹

Delayed when a launch fouled one of its lines, the *Merrimac* approached the entrance just at dawn on June 2, 1898. Admiral Sampson was alarmed at the visibility afforded the Spanish and ordered the mission's recall, much to Hobson's chagrin. In fact, Hobson later admitted that he came close to disobeying but finally turned back, reluctantly. He was afraid he would not get another opportunity. Too tense to rest, adrift in the hot sun and without food most of the day, Hobson's little crew spent a miserable day awaiting their next chance. Darkness and the imminence of action refreshed them. One change, critical as it proved, was made. An attempt to tow a lifeboat as a means of escape had failed on June 2, when it had capsized and broken loose. Instead, a boat was put on the deck of the collier and as an afterthought a catamaran was added.¹²

The crew of the *Merrimac* began their journey into history about 1:30 A.M., June 3, 1898, after a leisurely midnight breakfast of sandwiches and coffee. More batteries had been located but three of the mines had in the meantime failed to respond to test, probably because of a leak. Of the remaining seven each was given its own firing circuit to insure as many detonations as possible. The men were spread throughout the ship and each had a preliminary function assigned before he was to explode his torpedo. Cockswain J. E. Murphy of the *Iowa* had the most hazardous test. First, he was to cut loose the tow anchor with an axe, then in the darkness make his way across the narrow fore-castle dodging the rushing chain and breaking hawsers while fully exposed to enemy fire. Arriving portside, Murphy was to detonate his torpedo which was alongside the collision bulkhead, directly beneath himself. The others had similar, if less dangerous, jobs except for Hobson and Deignan, the helmsman, who would remain on the bridge. The men stripped to their long underwear and each wore a life jacket and pistol belt.

¹¹Captain James Miller to the Secretary of the Navy, June 6, 1898, Navy Dept. Records, National Archives; Hobson, *The Sinking of the Merrimac*, 35-40, 45-56.

¹²Hobson, *The Sinking of the Merrimac*, 57-62; Rear Admiral William T. Sampson to the Secretary of the Navy, June 3, 1898, in "Appendix to the Report of the Bureau of Navigation," *Annual Reports of The Navy Department for the year 1898*, 55th Cong., 3rd Sess., House Document No. 3 (Washington, 1898), 437.

They were connected to the bridge with ropes secured to their wrists and signals were prearranged. A launch from the *New York* followed to look for survivors near the harbor entrance after the event.¹³

Hobson expected to be detected from Morro Castle on the east side of the channel when he came within 2,000 yards. In the predawn darkness the lumbering collier actually got within 400 yards of the entrance before it was discovered and fired upon by a small picket boat which coolly concentrated its quick firing guns on the exposed rudder of the *Merrimac*. Other heavier batteries joined in with an indescribable din. So many hits were registered that the clash of steel on steel was almost constant. But Hobson's little crew held steadily to their tasks. The double bottom having already been flooded, the seacocks were opened at the proper moment, and Hobson ordered the first torpedoes detonated. Without waiting for a response he then ordered the final turn to starboard. The ship failed to respond and plowed blithely straight down the channel at six knots. The survivors later determined that the steering had been shot away not in one, but in three different places.¹⁴

Amid the noise of the heavy Spanish fire, which was now general, Hobson ordered the remaining torpedoes fired. Only two torpedoes responded and these were insufficient to sink the ship quickly enough to lodge it in the narrow part of the channel. The ground tackle proved incapable of stopping the 7,000 ton *Merrimac* moving at six knots and both anchors tore loose. The ship continued to move with the tide into the inner harbor under increasing Spanish fire. The ship was hit literally hundreds of times, primarily by light quick firing weapons. At least ten remote controlled mines were also detonated, one of which damaged the *Merrimac*. This left only four mines in the Spanish defense field had Sampson known and dared the entrance. The Spanish fire was so intense that they took heavy casualties from their own "overs." Spanish officers later told Hobson they lost fourteen dead and thirty-seven wounded to what they believed to be an armored cruiser. The *Reina Mercedes* and destroyer *Pluton* each fired two auto-

¹³*Ibid.*, 57-88.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 90-101; Captain Victor M. Concas Y. Palau, "The Squadron of Admiral Cervera," O.N.I., *War Notes*, 1-117.

mobile torpedoes at the *Merrimac* but Hopson reported no hits.¹⁵

Somehow in this incredible crossfire the crew of the *Merrimac* remained untouched save for one cut lip. Crowding in a small circle on deck, they rode the slowly sinking ship to its grave, well inside the harbor entrance where it came to rest with just the extreme upperworks above water and where it offered no real obstacle to navigation. Although banged around by the rush of water as the ship sank, Hobson and his crew were again unhurt and found cover on the surface by clinging to the catamaran, which was still tied to the sunken *Merrimac* and which capsized as the larger vessel had sunk.¹⁶

For about an hour, until daybreak, the men clung to the bottom of the catamaran in the uncomfortably cold water. Then in the early daylight they saw a canvas covered steam launch approaching them. Hobson, trapped in broad daylight in an enemy anchorage, decided to save his crew by surrender and as the launch approached, he swam out to it. He was pulled aboard by the squad of soldiers on the launch and to his amazement found himself before Admiral Cervera himself. The Admiral's first words were of praise for the courage of Hobson and his crew ("valiente, valiente") and he treated the Americans with Old World courtesy. At first held by the Spanish Navy, they were later turned over to the Army and held ashore.¹⁷

The conditions of Hobson's imprisonment seem almost unbelievable to those accustomed to the horrors of modern war. Cervera and his officers treated Hobson and his men as honored guests. Word was sent out to Admiral Sampson of their fate and personal belongings were brought back to them. Hobson himself was lionized by the Spanish who regarded him as a hero and who often traveled miles just to meet him. Admiral

¹⁵Rear Admiral Pascual Cervera Y Topete, "A Collection of Documents Relative to the Squadron Operations in the West Indies," O.N.I., *War Notes No. VII*, 100; Rear Admiral Pluddermann, "Comments of Rear-Admiral Pluddermann, German Navy," O.N.I., *War Notes, No. II*, 12; Hobson, *The Sinking of The Merrimac*, 92-112, 160.

¹⁶Hobson, *The Sinking of The Merrimac*, 110-115.

¹⁷Miss Margaret Hobson, sister of Richmond P. Hobson, personal interview with the author at Magnolia Grove, Greensboro, Alabama, January 20, 1961; Hobson, *The Sinking of The Merrimac*, 116-220; Captain Francis J. Higginson to the Commander in Chief, U. S. Naval Forces, North Atlantic Station, June 6, 1898, Navy Dept. Records, National Archives.

Cervera, himself, visited Hobson and the two became friends and corresponded frequently until the Admiral's death in 1910. In his confinement Hobson was given almost anything he desired and he was not reluctant to take advantage of it. He became an instant world celebrity and while in prison not only corresponded freely but even sent and received telegrams.¹⁸

Hobson and his crew were exchanged after the destruction of Cervera's fleet and reached American lines to find themselves famous. Although the glories of higher ranking officers such as Dewey and Roosevelt eclipsed some of their fame and proved more enduring, the crew of the *Merrimac* were the popular heroes of the hour. Perceiving his propoganda value, Hobson was sent by the Navy on a national tour and he was mobbed in city after city, particularly by young ladies who insisted on kissing him. A popular candy quickly reached the market known as "Hobson's Kisses." The crew, except Hobson, was each awarded the Medal of Honor. It was not then customary to award the medal to officers.¹⁹

Hobson retired on medical grounds from the Navy in 1903, and entered politics, primarily to strengthen his beloved Navy. His fame, fine appearance, and exceptional speaking abilities assured electoral success. Serving in Congress from 1906 to 1914, Hobson quickly emerged as the nation's leading advocate of naval armaments and publicizer of the "yellow peril," the Japanese menace. He became, and remained, the voice of the Navy on Capitol Hill. He also introduced the first Prohibition Amendment and was one of the most important leaders in that reform movement. An effective speaker, Hobson was also one of the nation's most popular Chautauqua lecturers even outdrawing the well-known William Jennings Bryan. Defeated in a race for the Senate in 1914, Hobson retired from politics and turned his attention to Prohibition and later to the international movement to control narcotics. In 1933, Hobson, who was suffering financially, was made Rear Admiral (retired) and awarded

¹⁸Lt. Jose Muller Y. Tejeiro, "Battles and Capitulations of Santiago de Cuba", O.N.I., *War Notes No. 1, passim*; Hobson, *The Sinking of The Merrimac*, 124-286; *Daily Times* (Chattanooga), February 17, 1910; *Diario De Cadiz* January 19, 1910.

¹⁹Scrapbook of newspaper clippings at Magnolia Grove, Greensboro, Alabama; *New York Times*, January 8, 1899; *San Francisco Examiner*, December 23, 1898, December 24, 1898.

the Medal of Honor by a special act of Congress. Afterwards he always seemed prouder of being called Admiral than Congressman. When death came in 1937, Hobson was once more on the lecture circuit vainly urging naval preparedness upon his reluctant nation and warning of coming Japanese aggression. He was buried in Arlington National Cemetery on a cold and snowy morning with a Navy and Marine escort to the strains of "Lead Kindly Light."