

# THE CASE OF THE HORNET.

**Interview with Commodore Higgins—Why He Ran into Wilmington—What He Intended to do With Spanish Merchant Vessels—His Future Movements.**

WASHINGTON, Nov. 7, 1862.

Commodore Edwin Higgins, of the Cuban navy, late in command of the *Hornet*, with F. J. McNulty, surgeon of the same vessel, arrived here yesterday from Wilmington, N. C. The Commodore is a fine looking man, of about fifty-five years of age, medium height, well built, with a large round head, thinly covered with gray hair. He has a mild, good natured expression of countenance, an eye large, but not particularly brilliant, and an aquiline nose, considerably bent to one side, as if it had received a severe visitation from some antagonist in a prize fight. Setting off the whole is a gray mustache, which, with his hair, makes the Commodore look a much older man than he really is. No person meeting him for the first time would take him for the commander of a privateer. Indeed, he denies that the *Hornet* was in any sense a privateer. He insists that she was a regularly commissioned man-of-war belonging to the Cuban republic. The Commodore's whole bearing and general appearance impress you with the idea that he is a man of coolness, daring and pluck, which he unquestionably is, or he would hardly have ventured, at his time of life, on such a hazardous business as the command of the *Hornet*. While he naturally regrets the capture of his ship he seems to take his bad luck with that kind of philosophy which says, "I'll try again and hope to do better next time."

The Commodore received your correspondent kindly and cordially, though he said there had been some misrepresentation of his motives and conduct in the *HERALD*, but he knew they were not intentional. After the usual salutations I said, "Commodore, how does the matter stand now?"

COMMODORE—Well, our ship lies at Wilmington, and, after a trial, all the officers and crew, with the exception of seven, have been discharged. Why these seven officers are held I do not know.

CORRESPONDENT—Has your ship been dismantled as well as disarmed?

COMMODORE—Yes, partially dismantled and wholly disarmed. They have robbed her of nearly everything, including stores, tobacco and clothing.

CORRESPONDENT—Do you consider the *Hornet* a vessel in all respects adapted to the purposes you had in view?

COMMODORE—No, not exactly. She is a sidewheel steamer, and could not, therefore, be put under canvas. Besides, she could not carry more than six day's coal, and being a fast sailer, she would do better for a blockade runner than a man-of-war that expected to encounter well armed vessels on the ocean.

CORRESPONDENT—There have been various statements published, Commodore, about your object in running into Wilmington. Will you give me your own version of it?

COMMODORE—With great pleasure, sir. When I arrived off Montauk Point, from Halifax, I found myself out of coal, and it was necessary to get some before proceeding further. I succeeded in communicating with our friends and they sent out a schooner with about a hundred and sixty tons, which we took on board in a gale, and then proceeded on our way. My chief engineer soon informed me that the coal was of a poor quality, indeed, it was half slate, and he made a written report to that effect. It appears that those who sent the coal out did so without examining its quality. They found the schooner with a load of coal and sent her out to me without delay. When we were off Hatteras the chief engineer informed me that it was useless to proceed further without getting coal. It would be impossible, he said, to handle the vessel in an action with the coal we received off Montauk Point. On my way South I did not know but that I might meet a Spanish war vessel, and I did not want to be taken at a disadvantage. The chances were I could neither get away from her nor fight her. Under these circumstances I set about to look for a place where I could get coal. I thought at first of putting into Hatteras inlet, but I found there was no prospect of getting coal there, and the sea was running so high at the time that, with a sidewheel steamer, the experiment might have resulted disastrously on a lee shore. When I reached Cape Fear I found a pilot, who informed me that I could get coal at Wilmington; that the fort there was unmanned and that there were no United States naval vessels in the neighborhood. By anchoring off Smithville he thought I could get the coal sent down to me and be off before the United States officials were well aware of my presence, certainly before they could send any force to detain me. I concluded to do this, and he took me in. We arrived off Smithville on a Saturday night. That is thirty miles below Wilmington. I immediately despatched the paymaster and another officer to Wilmington after the coal. They did not reach there until one o'clock Sunday morning. After making inquiry they ascertained that the only man who had coal to sell in such large quantities was a pious Presbyterian. Arousing him, they found that he would not sell on Sunday, not before Monday. I did not think that the United States authorities would do more than order me to leave, even after they found I was there. It was useless to go to sea again without coal, because the coal was not only bad but it was nearly all used. I concluded to wait until Monday, get my coal and be off. On Monday the authorities discovered I was there, and the United States Marshal came down and took possession of the ship and put her under the guns of the fort, having previously thrown some soldiers into it.

CORRESPONDENT—You may have seen a statement to the effect that your wife met you at Wilmington almost as soon as you arrived there, which looked as if your running into Wilmington was preconcerted. Is there anything in that?

COMMODORE—No sir; it is not true. While we were taking coal off Montauk Point I was struck with a hawser, which parted and knocked me senseless. I have not been well since, and when we got detained at Wilmington the surgeon here (pointing to Dr. McNulty), advised me to telegraph for Mrs. Higgins, which I did. She did not arrive there for several days after we were seized.

CORRESPONDENT—Where did you intend going when you started?

COMMODORE—I learned that the Spanish mail steamer left Havana on the 1st and 15th of each month. I was anxious to run across the track of the one leaving on the 1st of October, and bent all my energies to do so. If the bad coal that I got from the schooner and the pious Presbyterian coal dealer at Wilmington had not failed me I would have encountered that steamer, for I was well aware the course she takes.

CORRESPONDENT—What would you have done with her, had you caught her?

COMMODORE—I would most probably have made a fire out of her. The only trouble I would have had would have been in taking care of my prisoners.

CORRESPONDENT—I suppose you would have burned most of the Spanish merchantmen you came across.

COMMODORE—Yes; I could not well afford to have taken them into the ports open to the Cubans and had them condemned as prizes.

CORRESPONDENT—Was it your intention to have run into any of the ports of Cuba?

COMMODORE—Yes; I intended to run in, destroy whatever shipping I found, and, in connection with the Cuban land force, seize and hold one of the ports, and then get out again the best way I could. In my opinion the Cuban army ought to come to one of the seaports and get hold of it. This would be better than defending the inland towns.

CORRESPONDENT—Was any part of your officers and crew Cubans?

COMMODORE—the paymaster and two or three of the engineers were Cubans, but none of the crew. I did not consider that it would do to mix the seamen.

CORRESPONDENT—Commodore, what about your future movements?

COMMODORE—Well, I can hardly say. I shall probably try it over again if I can get another ship. The loss of the *Hornet* fell more heavily on the officers than on anybody else. We had some prospect of making dashes here and there, earning a good deal of prize money and attaining high naval rank. I was to be made admiral of the Cuban navy as soon as they established one. You will see that it was to our interest to go ahead and not to get seized. I went no out again except I can get a better ship than the *Hornet*, one more adapted to work on the high seas. Whether I can get this remains to be seen.