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CHARLES E HOOKER

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BY

COLONEL CHARLES E. HOOKER.

Lieutenant Charles W. Read, one of the most heroic men brought into public notice by the great war, was born near Sharon, Madison county, Miss., May 13, 1840, son of William and Maria (Dotson) Read. His father was a planter in Hinds county until his removal to California in 1849. Young Read was reared in Hinds county, near Edwards, and at Jackson, and had the advantages of the country schools and Andrews college, and experience in the printing office of Barksdale & Jones. In 1854, through the influence of W. L. Sharkey, Senator Foote and F. S. Hunt, he was appointed to the United States naval academy. When the secession movement began he was a midshipman on the U. S. S. Powhatan, at the port of Vera Cruz, and he promptly tendered his resignation, but remained on duty until reaching New York, March 13, 1861. On the next day he started South and soon put himself at the disposal of the Confederacy. He was appointed acting midshipman, April, 1861; acting master, September, 1861; lieutenant for the war, February, 1862, and later first lieutenant, provisional navy. His first service was with the batteries at Evansport on the Potomac. Thence he was ordered to New Orleans, where he gained great fame by his gallantry in the naval battle of April 24, 1862. After Lieut. T. B. Huger, commanding the gunboat McRae, was fatally wounded, Read took command, and kept his men from

panic though the boat was on fire next the powder magazine. Admiral Farragut permitted him to take the *McRae* with the wounded up to New Orleans, and just as the last man was taken off, the boat went down off the city, with the Confederate flag still fluttering at her peak. After his exchange the young lieutenant was on duty at Port Hudson when Dewey's ship, the *Mississippi*, was destroyed in attempting to run past the Confederate gunners. Next he joined the gallant *Isaac N. Brown* at the Yazoo river, aided him in fitting out the famous ram *Arkansas*, and had charge of two guns in the memorable dash through the Federal fleet. When the ram was abandoned near Baton Rouge it was Read who kept his guns going against the *Essex* until after his own boat was in flames. On the night of January 15, 1863, he began his brilliant service on the high seas, by running the blockade of Mobile bay, on the cruiser *Florida*, under Captain Maffitt. On this vessel he cruised off the coast of Brazil until the brig *Clarence* was captured and converted into a cruiser, under his command. With one six-pounder boat howitzer and some Quaker guns to frighten merchant skippers, he cruised along the American coast, capturing his first prize off Cape Hatteras. But the *Clarence* was slow, and when the *Tacony* was taken, he transferred his battery and crew to the latter. Sailing on up the New England coast he captured and burned with immense vigor, creating a tremendous panic in the northeast, and drawing a fleet of fifty-one Federal vessels in pursuit of him. Fourteen merchant vessels were his prizes previous to June 26, 1863, when he took the schooner *Archer*, and again transferred his crew. Then he sailed into the harbor of Portland, Me., in peaceful guise, and at night captured the revenue cutter *Caleb Cushing*, with which he hoped to return to Wilmington, N. C. But next morning the wind failed and he was surrounded by steamers and compelled to surrender after he had burned the *Cushing*. Read was charged with piracy, and there was a clamor in New England for his execution, but saner judgment prevailed. Being incarcerated at Fort Preble, first, he was soon transferred to Fort Warren, Boston harbor, it appearing that the good people of Portland were subject to night panics on account of his presence, though confined in a cell. From Fort Warren Read made a daring escape, accompanied by Lieutenant Alexander, of the navy. Crawling at night through an unused chimney in a casemate, a feat

for which Read had prepared by starving himself, they hid under a pile of old dunnage on the beach. The guard, on approaching, with casual suspicion, thrust his bayonet in this heap, and the weapon passed through Read's thigh, pinning him to the ground. Not a sound betrayed the presence of the Confederate, and the guard, touching his bayonet, remarked that the dunnage was wet, and passed on. Read and his companion swam out to a small fishing sloop, and set sail. In the morning they were surrounded by war craft and steamers hunting for the "pirate," who lay, exhausted and suffering, at the bottom of the sloop, badly wounded and his eyes almost blinded by the lime of the chimney he had escaped through. They might have escaped had not Alexander's single-handed attempts to manage his boat attracted attention. Back to prison they went, and Read was debarred from Confederate service until his exchange in the summer of 1864. He was soon on duty again, in the James River squadron, and conceiving and urging daring enterprises to break the Federal blockade and open the river. He inspired the attempt to pass the river obstructions in January, 1865, and commanded the launches which led the way and drew a tremendous fire from the Dutch Gap batteries. Soon afterward he attempted to take torpedo boats overland, to launch against the Federal monitors. But it was fated that no success should attend the efforts to save the Confederate capital. On one of his expeditions he captured one tug boat, two schooners, and a regiment of Confederate cavalry, the latter being taken for enemies at night. From Richmond Lieutenant Read went to Louisiana to take command of the gunboat Webb. With this vessel he proposed to run past the Federal warships guarding the Red river and Mississippi, and the forts below New Orleans, capture the guardship Pampero at the mouth of the river and cruise in the gulf. He started down the Red river on this daring venture, April 16, 1865, a week after the surrender of General Lee, safely eluded a formidable fleet on entering the Mississippi, and coming down the great river at full speed, had partly passed the fleet at New Orleans before he was discovered. The Webb was innocently disguised with cotton bales, and the lookouts were on the qui vive for a formidable Confederate ram. As soon as recognized several shots were fired at the Webb, and Read ran up the Confederate flag and crowded on full steam, ordering the pilot to keep the center

of the channel and run down anything that got in the way. The levees were crowded with people to witness this last daring exploit of the war. Wild rumors spread that President Davis was with Read, and that they carried out vast quantities of Confederate treasure. The French man-of-war dipped her colors as the Webb steamed past. The Federal flags were at half-mast in mourning for the death of President Lincoln. On past the city, chased by four Federal boats, Read swept unharmed for over twenty miles. Then chance defeated his skill and dauntless courage. The sloop-of-war Richmond, twenty-two guns, was sighted ahead around a bend, and the Webb came under her broadside fire. There was nothing to do but run the boat ashore and burn her, after which Read escaped into the swamp. When hostilities had ceased this daring soul led an adventurous life in a seafaring way for some years, and then became a pilot at the mouth of the Mississippi. He died at Meridian, Miss., in January, 1892. He was twice married, and two of his sons are now in the United States service, one as a civil engineer, the other as a purser in the navy.