

## Chapter 12

# Battle of the Ironclads



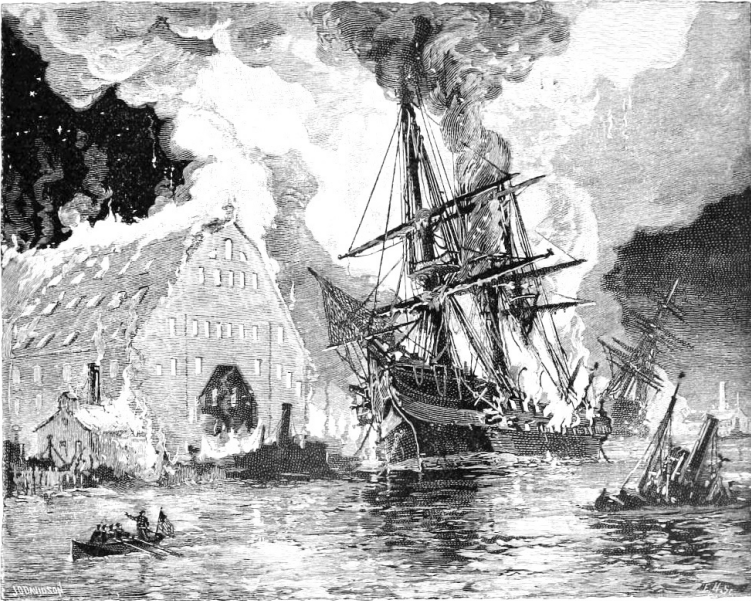
**N**OW came a time of comparative quiet while each side laid its plans and drilled its forces. Part of the North's plan was to close the ports of the Southern states and so keep them from getting supplies from abroad. This was a bold thing to do, for the coast was some three thousand miles long, and the government owned less than fifty ships with which to guard it. When the blockade was proclaimed, many of these Federal ships were far away in foreign lands. At first, the blockade amounted to little.

But by degrees, it took effect. Ships that had been far away returned, others of all sorts and sizes were bought, and still others were built with the utmost speed. Well-armed ships were stationed near the mouth of each harbor and did valiant work, capturing hundreds of vessels that tried to run the blockade. Slowly but surely, the iron hand of the North gripped the commerce of the South. Before the end of the war, the Southern ports were shut off from the rest of the world.

This was a disaster for the Southerners, for they depended almost entirely on their cotton trade with Europe. Now the cotton rotted on the wharves. There were few factories in the South, for manufacturing could not be carried on with slave labor. So the Southerners relied on the outside world for clothes, boots, blankets, iron, and war materials. Now they were cut off from trade and could get none of these things.

Eight days after the firing on Fort Sumter, the Confederates had seized the United States navy-yard at Norfolk, Virginia.

But before they succeeded in getting possession, its Union commander had destroyed the shops and ships. One ship, the *Merrimac*, had burned to the water's edge and sunk.



*The Union commander destroyed the Norfolk navy-yard*

Soon discovering that her engines were not damaged, the Confederates raised the *Merrimac* and rebuilt her. This time she was covered with plates of iron, mounted with large cannons, and made into an ironclad war vessel. When completed, she was an ugly-looking, black monster with sloping sides and a terrible iron beak.

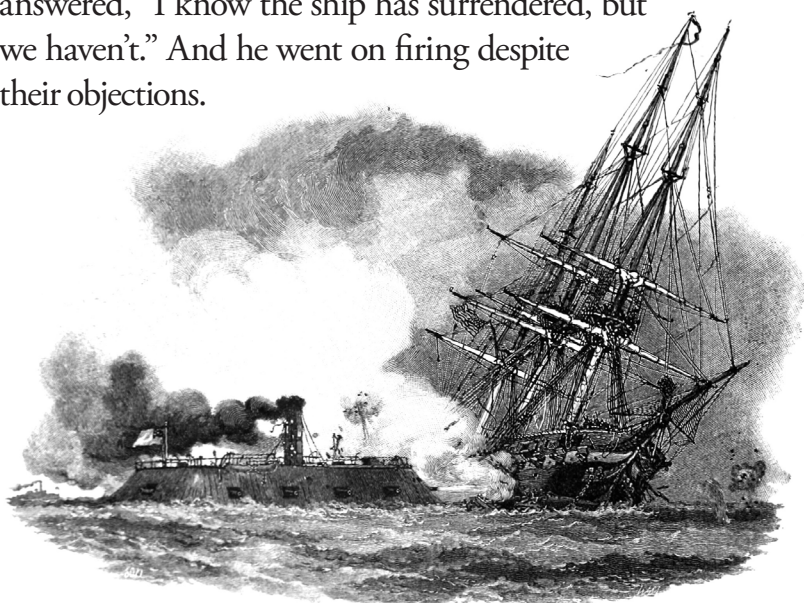
At this time, there were only about three ironclads in the world. They belonged to Britain and to France and had never yet been used in naval warfare.

When the ironclad *Merrimac* was ready, she put out to sea to attack the three wooden vessels from the North which were riding at anchor in Hampton Roads at the mouth of the James River. Two of the three Union ships opened fire on the strange-looking

sea monster. Their shots could not pierce her iron plates, and the *Merrimac* advanced unharmed.

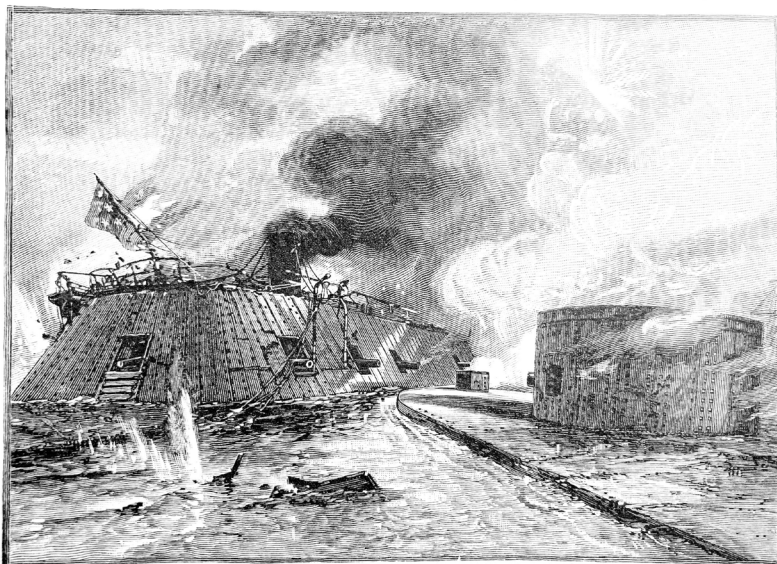
Steadily, steadily she drew near the *Cumberland* until, with a mighty crash, she tore a gaping hole in the wooden ship. In rushed the water, and the *Cumberland* filled and sank. Her flag continued to flutter there in the breeze for months because, having sunk in only fifty feet of water, the tops of the masts still rose above the waves.

The destruction of the *Congress* quickly followed, which was run aground, set afire by red-hot cannonballs, and forced to surrender. But when boats came from the *Merrimac* to take possession of it, the Union troops in a fort nearby began to bombard them. The Confederate officers loudly ordered them to stop, saying the vessel was theirs. But the fort's commander defiantly answered, "I know the ship has surrendered, but we haven't." And he went on firing despite their objections.



*The Merrimac rammed into the Cumberland*

It was dusk by now. The terrible *Merrimac* steered off, returning to port for the evening but with the firm intention of coming out again on the morrow.



*The two ironclad vessels engaged in battle*

The Federals were filled with consternation. This horrible ironclad vessel would undoubtedly return with daylight. What chance had any wooden ship against it?

But help was near.

President Lincoln and Congress had been busy preparing for this danger. A Swedish inventor named Ericsson had created a new vessel that would repel cannon. The work of building was carried on in secret, and at the end of one hundred days, the new boat was ready. She came into Hampton Roads almost immediately after the battle with the *Merrimac*.

The next morning the *Merrimac* came sailing out to destroy the *Minnesota*, the last of the three Northern ships. But there beside the *Minnesota* lay another vessel—a strange-looking affair like a cheesebox mounted on a raft. It was the new Union warship, the *Monitor*, and it, too, was ironclad.

The captain of the *Merrimac* had expected an easy victory, but to his surprise, he found this little cheesebox between him and his victim. He opened fire, but his shells might have been peas

for all the effect they had. The *Monitor* steamed on unhurt until she was close to the *Merrimac*. Then she fired.

Never before had two ironclad vessels engaged in battle. For hours they fought without being able to do each other severe damage. The lumbering *Merrimac* tried to run down her enemy, but the quick little *Monitor* danced round and round, turning her turret now this way, now that, and firing how she pleased. At length, the *Merrimac* gave up the tussle and sailed away. The little *Monitor* had saved the *Minnesota* and had held the dreaded *Merrimac* in check. A new era of naval warfare had begun.

The *Merrimac* had done all the damage she was ever to do. Some weeks later, the Confederates were forced to give up Norfolk, and before they went, they destroyed their ironclad vessel.