THE RAIDER ALABAMA:  
CAPE COLONY, SEPTEMBER 1863

Raphael Semmes:  
Journal, September 16–24, 1863

A bark-rigged sailing ship equipped with an auxiliary steam engine, the Alabama was built at the Laird shipyard in Liverpool. She left port on July 29, 1862, and was armed with eight guns off the Azores before being commissioned as a Confederate warship on August 24. Her captain was Raphael Semmes, who had entered the U.S. Navy in 1826 and risen to the rank of commander before resigning his commission in 1861. As captain of the Confederate raider Sumter, he had captured eighteen American merchant ships between July 1861 and January 1862 before seeking refuge at Gibraltar. Unable to repair his ship, Semmes went to England and was given command of the new raider. While almost all of the ship’s officers were Confederates, the crew of the Alabama had been recruited in Liverpool and served for double their normal wages and the promise of prize money. By the time she reached Simon’s Town in British South Africa, the Alabama had sunk a Union gunboat, captured or burned fifty-four American whalers and merchant ships, and was being pursued by the U.S.S. Vanderbilt. After leaving Simon’s Town, the Confederacy’s most destructive raider would sail through the East Indies and into the South China Sea before returning to the Indian Ocean in the new year.

Wednesday, September 16.—Weather very fine. At daylight lighted fires and at 8 A.M. went ahead under steam. Saw nothing during nearly a whole day’s steaming, except a bark (neutral) toward evening. At 3 P.M. doubled the Cape of Good Hope and steamed into the anchorage at Simon’s Town, where we came to at about 4:30 P.M. The Vanderbilt had left on Friday last and was reported to have hovered near the cape for a day or two. Greatly discouraged by the news from home—Vicksburg and Port Hudson fallen, Rosecrans’s army marching southward, and Lee having recrossed the Potomac. Our poor people seem to be terribly pressed by the Northern hordes of

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Goths and Vandals, but we shall fight it out to the end, and the end will be what an all-wise Providence shall decree.

**Thursday, September 17.**—Weather good. Called on the admiral and received a visit from the captain of the *Narcissus*, Bickford. Various misrepresentations had been made to the admiral as to my proceedings since I left, etc., by the U. S. consul, which I explained away. Spent an agreeable half hour with the admiral and his lady. There being no coal here—the *Vanderbilt* having taken it all—I made arrangements for it to be sent to me from Cape Town. Visited the Dutch transport.

**Friday, September 18.**—Weather pleasant. Took a long stroll up the hills, permitting the men to visit the shore on liberty, and they are behaving badly, as usual.

**Saturday, September 19.**—The steamer *Kadie* arrived with coals for me from Cape Town. Hauled her alongside and commenced coaling. Walked on shore and lunched with Captain Bickford. Dispatched letters for the mail steamer for England. Liberty men drunk and few returning. Dined with the admiral. A very pleasant party, composed entirely of naval officers—the captains of the ships present, the captain superintendent of the dockyard, etc. After dinner the young ladies made their appearance in the drawing-room and we had some music.

**Sunday, September 20.**—Weather very fine. Heeled ship over to get at the copper around the blowpipe, which was worn off. Visited the shore at half past 9, took a long walk, dropped in upon the port captain, and went to church, Father Kiernan saying mass. He is an earnest, simple-minded Irish priest, with a picturesque little church on the hillside, and a small congregation, composed chiefly of soldiers and sailors, a seaman serving mass, Captain J. H. Coxon and a couple of the lieutenants of the squadron being present. Liberty men returning in greater numbers to-day; the money is giving out and the drunk wearing off.

**Monday, September 21.**—Morning cloudy. At daylight hauled the steamer alongside again, and recommenced coaling. Called to see the ladies at the admiral’s after the dinner, and walked through their quite extensive garden, winding up a ravine, with a rapid little stream of water passing through it. Afternoon rainy.
Tuesday, September 22.—Morning cloudy, with showers of rain; wind hauling to the S. E., and the weather clearing toward noon. Coaling. A large number of liberty men on shore yet. The Yankee consul, with usual unscrupulousness, is trying to persuade them to desert, and the drunken and faithless rascals will, many of them, no doubt, sell themselves to him. With one or two exceptions the whole crew have broken their liberty—petty officers and all. With many improvements in the character of the seaman of the present day in regard to intelligence, he is as big a drunkard and as great a villain as ever. Finished coaling this afternoon. Equinoctial weather, blustering and rainy.

Wednesday, September 23.—Refitting the fore-topmast. Some twenty men still absent. A few are picked up by the Simon’s Town police for the sake of the reward; and the sailor landlords, those pests of all seaports, are coming on board and presenting bills against the drunken rascals for board, etc. Of course these claims are not listened to. It is a common contrivance with Jack and these sharks to endeavor to extort money out of their ships. The process is simple enough. The landlord gives Jack a glass or two of bad liquor, and, it may be, a meal or two, and it is agreed between them that a bill of twenty times the value received shall be acknowledged. The land shark charges in this exorbitant way for the risk he runs of not being able to get anything. Knowing the villains well, I did not permit them to impose upon me.

Thursday, September 24.—Blowing a gale from the S. E. Waiting for the chance of getting over my deserters from Cape Town. Informed by telegraph in the afternoon that it was useless to wait longer, as the police declined to act. It thus appearing that the authorities declined to enable me to recover my men, 14 in number, enough to cripple my crew, I received on board 11 vagabonds, hungry and nearly shirtless, to take passage with me out to my own dominions, the high seas; thus very nearly setting off the number I had lost. Having a high respect for her Majesty, I made no contract with these fellows in her dominions. Informed by telegrams from Cape Town that vessels had arrived reporting the Vanderbilt on two successive days off Cape Agulhas and Point Danger. The moon being near its full, I preferred not to have her blockade me in
Simon’s Bay, as it might detain me until I should have a dark moon, and being all ready for sea, this would have been irksome, and so, the gale having lulled somewhat toward 9 P.M., I ordered steam got up, and at half past 11 we moved out from our anchors. The lull only deceived us, as we had scarcely gotten underway before the gale raged with increased violence, and we were obliged to buffet it with all the force of our four boilers. The wind blew fiercely, but still we drove her between 5 and 6 knots per hour in the very teeth of it. Nothing could exceed the peculiar, weird-like aspect of the scene, as we struggled under the full moonlight with this midnight gale. The surrounding mountains and highlands, seemingly at a great distance in the hazy atmosphere, had their tops piled with banks of fleecy clouds remaining as motionless as snow banks, which they very much resembled, the cold south wind assisting the illusion; the angry waters of the bay breaking in every direction and occasionally dashing on board of us; the perfectly clear sky, with no sign of a cloud anywhere to be seen, except those piled on the mountains already mentioned; and the bright full moon shedding her mysterious rays on all surrounding objects, illuminating, yet distancing objects; all these were things to be remembered. And last, the revolving light on the cape at regular intervals lighting up the renowned old headland. We passed the cape at about 3 A.M., and bearing away gave her the tryails reduced by their bonnets and close-reefed topsails; and I turned in to snatch a brief repose before the toils of another day should begin.