

# Mr. Eads' Bridge

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## CHAPTER FIVE

### Captain Eads

Becky saw a tall, balding man walking toward them. He wore a full beard but no mustache. "Well, hello," he said. "It's Miss Ascot, isn't it?"

"How kind of you to remember me."

"I recall that you asked a great number of excellent questions when you toured the caisson sometime back. I'm gratified that you show such interest in my little project."

"It's the most exciting thing in years. This is Becky. She's recently arrived and would like to learn more about the bridge — and if I may be so bold, the man behind it. Becky, may I present James Buchanan Eads."

"Pleased to meet you," Becky said, remembering to curtsy. "Are you really a captain?"

He gave a pleased chuckle. "An honorary title only, but one I'm quite proud of," he replied. "Because of my salvage work in the Mississippi, I became most familiar with the currents and treacherous conditions. There is not a stretch of more than fifty miles where I have not walked on the bottom. I was able to advise other ships of dangers, and they awarded me the title of 'Captain.' I also had my own little fleet of recovery ships, so the description was not entirely frivolous."

"Laura told me about your diving bells. Do you still do salvage work?"

"Good heavens, no! I did much of my own work underwater in the early days because of the danger involved, and my health suffered as a result. I gave that up twenty years ago and contented myself with helping others safely navigate the river. Then came the great Civil War. You're probably too young to remember much of that."

Becky nodded. "Yes, that was a little before my time."

"I was a Union man, and a friend of mine introduced me to leaders in Washington as a consultant. As a result, the government commissioned me to build ironclad warships for river defense. I delivered seven ships within five months; the first United States ironclads to enter combat. We built thirty vessels over the course of the war."

"Pardon me, Sir, but what exactly is an ironclad?"

"It's a ship like any other, but fitted with steel plates on all sides to protect it from cannon and gunfire. We slope,



or angle, the plates to strengthen them and prevent a direct impact. Cannonballs striking the ship then generally glance off the plates without doing heavy damage. Since the ship is clad round about with iron, the nickname 'ironclad' became the popular term."

"Did your ships help out a lot during the war?"

Captain Eads smiled. "The river ironclads gave the Union superiority along the interior waterways. We were able to support the ground troops by bombarding the Confederate defenses while their cannon balls merely bounced off our steel plating. By controlling the Mississippi, the Union was able to essentially cut the Confederacy in half. Generals Grant and Sherman agreed that the vessels were vital to our early victory in the West."

#### Newspaper Connections:

Ironclads were important during the Civil War. Find stories in the local newspaper about ships, trucks, trains or other vehicles that are impacting our world today.