

VICTORIOUS UNION

by Oliver Optic

Chapter 14: The Progress of the Action

The tremendous speed of the *Bellevite* had been telling with prodigious effect upon the distance between the two steamers, which was now reduced to not more than a mile and a half. Captain Rombold could not help realizing by this time that the American-built vessel outsailed the English-built. If the *Trafalgar* was good for twenty knots an hour, as represented, she had hardly attained that speed, as Captain Breaker judged by comparison with that of his own ship.

The Armstrong gun was still silent and it was pretty well settled that it had been disabled. In this connection Christy recalled something he had read in Simpson about the "inability of the Armstrong gun to resist impact," and he sent Midshipman Walters to bring the volume from his state-room. When it came he found the place, and read that three shots had been fired into one of them from a nine-pounder, either of which would have been fatal to the piece; and the section described the effect of each upon it.

He showed the book open at the place to Captain Breaker; but he had read it, and carried the whole matter in his mind. The gun quoted was weak, though the one on the deck of the *Tallahatchie* was vastly larger; but a correspondingly heavy force had been brought to bear upon it.

"I am satisfied that the enemy's long gun has been disabled; and while she continues the attempt to run away from us, she is unable to use her broadside guns to advantage, for she cannot bring them to bear upon us without coming to," said the commander. "But we are gaining at least a knot and a half an hour on her, and she must soon change her tactics."

"That is evident enough, sir," added Christy.

"The captain of that ship is a brave fellow, and I am confident he will fight as long as there is anything left of him," continued the captain as he occasionally directed his glass at the chase.

"He certainly will, sir, for I have seen his ship knocked out from under him, when he had abundant excuse for hauling down his flag before he did so; and we had hardly time on board of the *Chateaugay* to save his people before his vessel went to the bottom," continued Christy. "More than that, he is a gentleman and a scholar."

"You have told me about him, Christy; and I believe you suggested to Captain Chantor his best plan of action."

"I simply indicated what I should do in his place, and he adopted the method I mentioned," added Christy modestly.

"We may find it advisable to resort to the same plan, though I must add that it is by no means original with you. It was adopted in the war of 1812 with England."

"I did not claim the method as original, and knew very well that it was not so," replied the



A Victorious Union
Chapter 14: The Progress of the Action



lieutenant.

“The conditions on both sides must be favorable to the method or it cannot be adopted. One of the ships must have heavier metal than the other, so that she can knock her enemy to pieces at her leisure, and at the same time greater speed, so that she can keep out of the reach of guns of shorter range.”

“I am sorry I could not obtain more definite information in regard to the broadside guns of the Tallahatchie,” added Christy. “Bokes was a stupid fellow, drunk whenever he could obtain liquor, and could remember very little of what he heard on board of the steamer. But you have the long range Parrot, and I have no doubt you can knock her to pieces in your own time, since it has been demonstrated that we can outsail her.”

But at this moment the conversation was disturbed by the movement of the chase, which appeared to be again preparing to come about. The commander ordered the helm to be put to starboard to avoid being raked, and directed that the pivot gun should be discharged at the enemy. The enemy fired a broadside of three guns in quick succession, the solid shots from all three striking the *Bellevite* between wind and water. The carpenter’s gang was hurried below to plug the shot holes.

Blumenhoff secured his aim and fired; but this time he was less happy than on the former occasion, and though the shot went between the masts, no great damage appeared to be done. The enemy started her screw immediately, and swung around so as to present her starboard broadside before the *Parrot* could be made ready for another shot. The *Tallahatchie* delivered another three shots, two of which went wide of the mark. The third struck the carriage of the pivot gun, but fortunately it was not disabled, for it had been built to resist a heavier ball than the one which had struck it.

The captain of the *Bellevite* gave the order to Christy to swing to the ship, and give the enemy a broadside. The order was promptly executed as the enemy came about and resumed her course to the southward, which was certainly a very bad movement on her part. The four guns on the port side, two sixties and two thirties, sent their solid shots over the stern of the *Tallahatchie*.

A moment later, as the fresh breeze carried away the smoke to the north-east, the crew set up a lively cheer, for the mizzen mast of the chase toppled over into the water, and the pilot house seemed to have been knocked into splinters.

“Well done!” exclaimed Captain Breaker, clapping his hands as he faced the guns’ crews on the port side, and Christy joined him in the demonstration.

The men of the division gave another lusty cheer in response to the approval of the two chief officers. The captain had already ordered the ship to be put about so as to deliver the starboard broadside, and the other division of guns were impatient to have their chance at the enemy.

Christy had clapped his hands with his spy-glass under his arm; and when he had rendered his tribute of applause, he directed the instrument to the enemy. A squad of men were at work over the ruins of the pilot house, which was still forward, as the vessel had been built for a pleasure yacht, and another gang were getting the extra wheel at the stern ready for use.

The *Bellevite* came about in obedience to the order Christy had given to the quartermaster conning the wheel, and the guns on the starboard side were all ready to deliver their messengers of death and destruction.



A Victorious Union
Chapter 14: The Progress of the Action



“Aim at that extra wheel,” said the captain; and Christy delivered the order to the officers of the division.

The broadside was of the same metal as on the port side, and the result was looked for with even more interest than before. The appearance was that all three shots had struck at or near the wheel at the stern, and Christy promptly directed his glass to that part of the steamer, the captain doing the same thing.

“There is nothing of the wheel left in sight,” said the lieutenant. “The taffrail is knocked away, and at least one of those shots must have knocked the captain’s cabin into utter confusion.”

“Go ahead at full speed, Mr. Passford,” said Captain Breaker, after he had fully measured with his eye the damage done to the enemy.

“Her steering gear seems to be entirely disabled, sir,” continued Christy, after he had given the order to the chief engineer. “She does not appear to be able to come about, as no doubt she would if she could, so as to bring her broadside guns to bear upon us.”

The order had been given before to load the broadside and pivot guns with shells. The enemy had not started her screw for the reason that the ship was unmanageable with her steering gear disabled. The action had certainly gone against her; but she gave no indication that she was ready to surrender for the Confederate flag, which had been hoisted at the mainmast head when the mizzen was shot away, still floated in the breeze.

A gang of men were still at work where the extra wheel had been, and the commander evidently expected he should be able to repair the damage in some manner so that he could steer his ship. Captain Breaker gave the command to stop the screw, and a mighty hissing and roaring of steam followed when Christy transmitted it to the engine room. The order to come about on the headway that remained succeeded, and the three shells immediately exploded on the deck or in the hull of the enemy; but the extent of the damage could not be estimated.

The three from the starboard guns were next sent on their mission; but so far as could be seen no damage was done. The big Parrot was next discharged; but the expert captain of the gun was unfortunate this time, for the projectile dropped into the water beyond the steamer, though it seemed to pass very near the stern. For the next half hour the midship piece was kept busy, and its shots made destructive work about the deck of the Tallahatchie.

“I think we had better finish this business at once, and before the enemy has time to rig a new steering apparatus, Mr. Passford,” said Captain Breaker, as they came together on the quarter-deck.

“I think we can knock her all to pieces with the Parrot gun, sir,” replied Christy.

“But it might take all day to do that; and the Tallahatchie exhibits an astonishing power of resistance. Besides, she will soon repair her extra wheel, and have it ready for use. I am inclined to believe that we are wasting time, which will make it all the worse for us in the end,” reasoned the commander. “I am prepared to board her, for I think she must have lost a great many men.”

“No doubt of it, sir,” added the lieutenant.

“Lay her aboard on the port side, and have everything ready,” continued Captain Breaker.

Christy gave the necessary orders for this decided action, and the officers and the crew seemed to be delighted with the prospect of a hand-to-hand fight with the enemy. The lieutenant was not wholly



A Victorious Union
Chapter 14: The Progress of the Action



confident that the commander was right in his reasoning, but like a loyal officer and a true sailor who knows no duty but obedience, he heartily supported his superior. He walked the deck in the discharge of his duty; but he was thinking of something since the order to board had been given.

“Is there anything like a flank movement in boarding, Captain Breaker?” he asked, as he halted at the side of the commander.

“Of course the officers do their best to flank the enemy after they reach the deck,” replied the captain, looking with some astonishment at the lieutenant.

“I have reference to another sort of flanking,” added the inquirer.

“Of course in a squadron some of the ships may be ordered to operate in that manner; but a single ship acting against another can hardly do any flanking.”

“But I mean in boarding.”

“You had better explain yourself a little more definitely, for I do not understand you,” replied the commander with a puzzled expression on his face.

“We have one hundred and twenty men, with six absent on other duty,” continued the lieutenant. “Judging by what I learned from Bokes, I believe the Tallahatchie has less than a hundred, for he said she expected to recruit twenty or thirty men at Nassau. She has lost more men so far than we have, sir.”

“Grant all that you say, and where does the flanking come in?”

“Your order is to board on the port side of the enemy, which will bring the starboard side of the Bellevite alongside of her. Suppose you put twenty men or more into the launch, on the port side of the ship, where it cannot be seen by the enemy, just before the order to board is given. At the right time let this boat hurry to the starboard side of the Tallahatchie, where the twenty men or more will board, and take the enemy in the rear.”

The commander took off his cap and rubbed his bald head as if to stimulate his ideas; but he made no answer then to the suggestion.

Paul Vapoor was driving the engine to its utmost, and the ship was rapidly approaching the enemy.

