

# A VICTORIOUS UNION

by Oliver Optic

## *Chapter 15: A Flank Movement Undertaken*

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The commander of the enemy's ship could not know that the Bellevite intended to board; but he could hardly help regarding with anxiety the rapid progress she was making through the water. The loyal ship was getting nearer to him, and Captain Rombold could not avoid seeing that his situation was becoming desperate. It was absolutely necessary for him to do something, unless he was ready to haul down his flag, which Christy, for one, having been present at a battle with him, did not expect him to do yet.

The executive officer kept a close watch upon the enemy, frequently using his glass, even while he was discussing his suggestion with the captain. There was great activity on deck near the stern of the Tallahatchie, and her commander must have been at least hopeful that the steering apparatus could be restored to some degree of efficiency. In the meantime he could not bring his broadside guns to bear on the Bellevite for he was unable to come about. The Federal ship was headed directly for the enemy, and as Captain Breaker was impatient to board, he could not fire the Parrot or the broadside battery without losing time to put his vessel in position for throwing shot or shell.

"She is starting her screw again!" exclaimed Christy suddenly, as he discovered the stirring up of the water astern of the enemy.

"I see she is," added the commander. "She has not got her extra wheel in position yet, and probably she has pried her tiller over, or hauled it over with a purchase. Make the course west, Mr. Passford."

Christy gave the order to the quartermaster, and without checking her speed, the Bellevite described a quarter of a circle and came to the desired course. The three guns of her port battery were immediately discharged, loaded with shell as on the last occasion. One of them was seen to explode in the midst of the gang of men who were at work on the extra wheel. The other two burst in the air, too far off to do any serious damage.

Very slowly, and apparently with great difficulty, the Tallahatchie swung around, so that her port guns could be brought to bear upon the Bellevite, and the two ships were abreast of each other so that neither could rake the other. The loyal ship continued on her course to the westward, and in ten minutes she had made three miles and a half, which placed her out of the reach of the broadside guns of the Tallahatchie.

Christy did not abate his watchfulness over the movements of the enemy. The shot from the sixty-pounder which had struck on the quarter of the Confederate, had evidently created a great deal of confusion in that part of the vessel. She had intended to describe a quarter of a circle in order to render her port broadside guns available, but she had not made more than the eighth of the circuit

*A Victorious Union*  
*Chapter 15: A Flank Movement Undertaken*

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before she appeared to be going ahead, and her direction was diagonal to that of the *Bellevite*.

“What does that mean?” asked Christy of the commander who stood near him, though he had a very decided opinion of his own on the subject.

“It simply means that the last shot which struck her deranged whatever expedient her captain had adopted for controlling the rudder,” replied the commander. “It failed when she was half round, and then she went ahead.”

“She has stopped her screw again, sir,” added the first lieutenant.

“It is time for her to haul down her flag; but she does not seem to be disposed to do it,” continued Captain Breaker. “It is certainly a hopeless case, and he ought to spare his men if not himself.”

“Captain Rombold is not one of that sort. Though he is a Briton, he is a ‘last ditch’ man.”

“Probably a very large majority of his ship’s company are English, or anything but Southern Americans, and he ought to have a proper regard for them.”

“I think he must see some chance of redeeming himself and his ship, for I never met a more high-toned and gentlemanly man in all my life, and I don’t believe he would sacrifice his people unless with a hope that he considers a reasonable one.”

“Come about, Mr. Passford, and bear down on the enemy. Unless he works his steering gear, we have her where she is utterly helpless,” said the commander.

“I wonder she does not get a couple of her heaviest guns in position on her quarter-deck, and use them as stern chasers,” said Christy, after he had obeyed the captain’s order, and the *Bellevite* was again headed directly for the enemy.

“She appears to require all the space there for the work on her steering appliances,” replied Captain Breaker. “In ten minutes more I hope we shall be able to board her; and I think we can then make very short work of this business. About the flanking movement you propose, Mr. Passford, I have never seen anything of the kind done, for most of my fighting experience with blockade-runners has been at long range, though I was in the navy during the Mexican war, where our operations were mostly against fortifications and batteries.”

“I do not consider the plan practicable except under peculiar circumstances, like the present,” returned Christy. “I am confident that we outnumber the enemy, and the men for the flank movement are available.”

“If we were boarding in boats we should naturally attack both on the starboard and port sides. But, Mr. Passford, the executive officer cannot be spared to command the launch and its crew.”

“I was not thinking of commanding the flanking party myself, sir.”

“Neither can the officers of divisions be spared.”

“I think I can find a volunteer, not in the sailing department, who would conduct the movement to a successful issue, Captain,” added Christy, very confidently.

“Mr. Vapoor? But we cannot spare him from the engine room for a minute,” protested the commander, who was well aware that the chief engineer was the lieutenant’s especial crony. “That would not do at all.”

“I was not thinking of Mr. Vapoor, sir,” interposed Christy.

“Who, then?” demanded the commander, lowering his spy-glass to look into the young man’s





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“My associate in the expedition to Mobile Point, who did quite as much as I did, if not more, to make it a success. I mean Mr. Graines, the third assistant engineer. I know that he is a brave man and an officer of excellent judgment,” replied the lieutenant, with more enthusiasm than he usually manifested when not in actual combat.

“Very well, Mr. Passford; I give you the order to carry out your plan, and I hope it will work to your satisfaction. But you must not take more than twenty men,” said the commander in conclusion of the whole matter.

“Mr. Walbrook,” called Christy without losing a moment in the preparations for carrying out his scheme, which neither the captain nor himself could say was an original idea.

The station of the second lieutenant at quarters is on the forecastle, and of the third in the waist, or the middle of the ship. The third lieutenant stepped forward at the call of the executive officer, touched his cap, for “the honors due the quarter-deck cannot be dispensed with,” even at exciting times.

Christy gave him the order to cast loose the launch, and have it in readiness to lower into the water at a moment’s notice; and Mr. Walbrook proceeded to obey it without delay. The first lieutenant then called Mr. Walters, a midshipman, and directed him to give his compliments to Mr. Vapoor, and ask him if he could spare the third assistant engineer for special duty for a couple of hours, more or less.

The messenger returned with the reply that the chief engineer would be happy to detail Mr. Graines for special duty at once. In five minutes more the assistant engineer appeared upon the quarter-deck in uniform, and touched his cap to the executive officer.

“I am directed to report to you, Mr. Passford, for special duty,” added Graines.

“I wish you to assume this duty, Mr. Graines, as a volunteer, if at all,” replied Christy. “All the officers on deck are required at their stations, and the commander has authorized what I call a flanking movement, which I purpose to send out under your orders.”

“I am very much obliged to you, Mr. Passford, for the honor you do me in selecting me for this duty; and I accept the position with pleasure,” answered the engineer, touching his cap again.

“But this is a fighting position, Mr. Graines,” added Christy with a smile.

“So much the better, sir; and if my education permitted, I should prefer to be in the thickest of the fight rather than shut up in the engine room,” returned the engineer; and this was just the estimate the lieutenant had made of him.

He had been well educated; but he had learned the trade of a machinist, and the want of any naval training rather than his own inclination had driven him into the engine room. But he had been three years at sea as a sailor, and came home as second mate of an Indiaman.

Christy explained to him very fully the plan he had suggested, and Graines readily grasped the idea. He provided himself with a cutlass and revolver, and became very enthusiastic in the discharge of his special duty. With the aid of the first lieutenant he selected the men for the movement, though Christy would not permit the detail to consist of all the best men, for that would not be fair or generous to the officers of divisions. They were a fair average of the quality of the seamen.



*A Victorious Union*  
*Chapter 15: A Flank Movement Undertaken*

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Captain Rombold, in spite of his misfortune in the Dornoch the year before, was inclined to disparage the bravery and skill of the officers of the United States Navy, and to regard the seamen as inferior to those of his own country, though he was too gentlemanly to express himself directly to this effect. Christy had drawn this inference from what he said in the conversations with him when Colonel Passford and he were prisoners on board of the Chateaugay.

Holding this view, as Christy was confident he did, it was plain from his action that he expected, or at least hoped, to win a victory in the hand-to-hand encounter which was impending. Of course it was possible that he might do so, and come into possession of the Bellevite, which had outsailed him, and disabled his ship for a combat at longer range.

As the Federal steamer drew near to the enemy a volley of musketry was poured into her, which was promptly returned, and several of the crew on both sides dropped to the deck, and were borne to the cockpit, though the relative strength of each remained about as before, as nearly as the officers on the quarter-deck of the Bellevite could judge.

The speed of the attacking ship had been greatly reduced as she neared the Tallahatchie, and the launch was already in the water with its crew of twenty men on board. The crew of the latter were armed with all the boarding weapons in use, and before the hands on deck had fastened to the enemy, the flanking party were working their heavy craft around the stern of the steamer.

The loyal ship came in contact with the side of the Confederate. The grappling irons were cast, and in an incredibly short space of time the two vessels were firmly attached to each other. The supreme moment had come, as all thought, but for some reason not apparent, the command to board was withheld. Captain Breaker who stood on the quarter deck with Christy, appeared to be perplexed. He saw that the seamen of the enemy were drawn up on the starboard side, instead of at the port bulwarks.

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