

THE ENEMY'S COLORS

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A true story of the War of the Rebellion—An incident in the battle of Mobile Bay, wherein a midshipman displayed a daring courage that turned the tide of strife.

CHARLEY CUTTER was cheerful. You would have had no doubt about that fact, could you have seen his laughing, good humored face.

His cheerfulness was never strained or assumed, but was the natural bubbling over of a superabundance of animal spirits and a happy, sunny disposition. Trials and troubles rolled away from his buoyant nature as water from a duck's back, his shipmates said.

He was the life of the sloop of war *Vandalia*, on which he was midshipman during the late War of the Rebellion. He had been a cadet at Annapolis on the breaking out of the struggle, and had just blossomed from a "plebe" to a junior, when he obeyed his country's call and went into active service.

He had been a favorite at the school, and was beloved by all on board the *Vandalia*, from the lowest powder monkey to his father, her commander.

Charley, at the time of which we write, was a stout, manly young fellow, between seventeen and nineteen years of age. Whether in the midst of a terrible storm, or in the thick of a bloody contest, there was an air of cheerfulness and ardor about him that won the hearts of the sturdy seamen and incited them to greater effort.

It is of the memorable battle of Mobile Bay we write. There it was that Cheerful Charley performed his first and last brave exploit.

With the long line of vessels, men

of war, steamers and gunboats, the *Vandalia* had plowed her way slowly, yet surely and safely, through the hidden dangers of torpedoes and the numerous ironclads and gunboats that blocked up the entrance to Mobile Bay.

Finally she reached the thickest of that terrible fight, and stood solid as a rock, her crew working bravely at their guns, sending sheets of flame and shot belching from her sides right and left.

With his blue cap clutched in his left hand, and his right grasping the mizzen shrouds, the captain's son, with pale but smiling face, peered through the dense smoke at the awful scene round about him. On all sides whistled the shells and round shot, mingled with the rattle of musketry, the cries of the living, and the groans of the wounded and dying.

With a fearless eye Charley gazed at the terrible scene, and his heart was stirred as he thought of his countrymen who were falling around him. Then an intense desire for revenge took possession of him, and he longed for an opportunity to come at close quarters with the enemy.

His wish was soon to be gratified.

Rushing at a terrific speed, and coming straight at the *Vandalia*, was an enemy's ram. It was only by Captain Cutter's presence of mind and promptness of action that a collision was prevented. As it was, she just grazed the sloop of war and grappled with her.

"Stand by to repel boarders!"

shouted the executive officer.

Springing from his position, Charley drew his cutlass, and with a revolver in his other hand, placed himself at the head of ten weather beaten tars, who seemed naturally to choose him as their leader.

“Now, men,” he cried gaily, “let us show those fellows what we’re made of, and strike a blow for the old flag.”

“Aye, aye, sir,” they chorused.

A shock and the two vessels came together in the death grapple.

With a rush and a bound young Cutter sprang on the bulwarks, followed closely by his ten men and his father, with the lieutenants and the crew. But here they stopped, for the enemy’s deck was bristling with cutlasses, and a hot fire was poured down upon them.

Only for a moment, however, and then they sprang at the enemy with impetuous fury.

A horrid carnage ensued, the dread details of which could not be portrayed by words. Flashing cutlasses, with cut, thrust and lunge; cracking revolvers, roaring of cannon, rending of woodwork, and yells of rage, pain and triumph, all blended together and enveloped in thick, pungent powder smoke, was all that could be seen or heard.

In the beginning of the contest, young Cutter and his men fought hard to gain a footing on the enemy’s deck. With a navy revolver in one hand and his cutlass in the other, Charley led his chosen few.

So fierce was their onset that the enemy gave way slowly. The latter stubbornly contested every inch of space, and for a moment it looked as if the *Vandalia*’s men would eventually have to give up their effort to take the ram. The crew of the latter outnumbered that of the *Vandalia* almost two to one.

Suddenly an idea occurred to

Charley. Fighting like a fury, he headed toward the mizzen shrouds. The enemy were compelled to fall back momentarily.

With a wild hurrah, Charley sprang like a cat into the rigging. With drawn cutlass in one hand, he ran quickly and nimbly up the ratlines. The top was filled with men who were firing at the *Vandalia*’s crew. They had not noticed any one coming up the shrouds.

Suddenly Charley’s head appeared over the rim of the top, and one of the men made a furious blow at him with the butt of his gun. The midshipman ducked his head, and the weapon came against the top with a crash that almost carried the stock from the barrel.

Before the man could deliver another blow, young Cutter sprang into the top and ran the fellow through the body. A howl of rage, and five other men who were in the top rushed at the intrepid midshipman.

With a cheerful smile, Charley braced himself against the topmost shrouds and awaited their onset. With a downward slash of his cutlass and a blow with his left fist he disposed of two of his enemies. There was hardly room in the top for the men to bring their guns to bear, so they reached for their revolvers.

While they were doing so, Charley sprang quickly past them and, leaping upon the gaff, pulled himself along the spar toward the extreme end, where hung the enemy’s colors. He grasped the flag, and with a slash of his cutlass it was free from its halyards. Twisting it in a sort of line, he tied it about his body. When this was accomplished, a cry of triumph burst from his lips, and he prepared to descend to the deck.

Meanwhile the men in the top had no doubt been puzzled to know what had become of their daring antagonist, as the

rolling smoke had hid him from their view. Then there was a sudden lull in the contest below them, and as the smoke cleared they saw and realized the daring midshipman's purpose.

One of them took deliberate aim at the boy. But Charley looked toward him just in time to escape the bullet by dropping at full length on the gaff. The deadly missile sped over his head, and he raised his body quickly.

There was no rope within reach by which to descend. He glanced down into the sea, and with a shudder of horror saw a number of sharks churning the water into foam as they rushed about to devour their human prey.

In that momentary glance he remembered afterward to have seen a shark of enormous size. The "man eater" appeared to be nearly half out of the water, with open jaws and lying over on its side as if awaiting another victim.

Charley hesitated a moment whether to try to regain the top or go overboard. There seemed certain death in either direction. Quickly reasoning that if he reached the top and the men despatched him, they would capture the flag, he turned to jump over the stern.

At the same moment there was the crack of a revolver in the top and an explosion beneath him. He gave a shriek, and fell through the smoky air.

Immediately after Charley had taken the enemy's colors, the latter noticed their absence. Supposing their vessel had surrendered, they stopped righting. Then the *Vandalia's* crew quickly disarmed and secured them.

Thus the battle was ended by Cheerful Charley's brave act. The navy achieved another victory by his daring exploit, and no doubt many of the crew of the *Vandalia* owed their lives to the

discontinuance of what was a most unequal struggle.

Meanwhile, what had become of the young midshipman? Immediately on returning to his own vessel, Captain Cutter found his son in his bunk, still wrapped in the enemy's flag, and insensible from a bullet wound in his side. One of the men, Ben Blayall, had closely watched the boy's movements, and as he fell from the gaff, sprang to his rescue.

Fortunately, just before they went overboard a hand grenade exploded in the water astern and dispersed the sharks. After considerable delay and a brave struggle, Blayall got on board the *Vandalia* with his senseless burden.

A few more words and we will conclude this veracious sketch, for it is true, the author having received the main facts from the hero himself. Of course all the names are fictitious.

After the battle Charley was conveyed to the hospital, where he remained six weeks, after which he went home on a furlough. Two months later he returned on board the *Vandalia* and was presented with a lieutenant's commission, in recognition of his gallant action.

In the report of the exploit to the Navy Department there was no mention of the fact that a school of man eating sharks were under the *Vandalia* stern, into whose dreadful jaws Charley believed, at the time, he was jumping. He was too modest to mention that circumstance of his daring venture. Charley says to this day nobody will ever know his thoughts and feelings at that moment, for he cannot find words to express them.

Blayall, the sailor who had rescued him, was not forgotten, for he was soon advanced to a petty officer. Charley saw lots of active service, and at the end of the war everybody addressed him as captain.