

Engagement between the United States frigate *President*, and His Britannic Majesty's sloop of war *Little Belt*: 16th May, 1811.

Whilst the diplomatic relations of the two countries exhibited this state of growing alienation, an incident occurred at sea, which threatened to precipitate the rupture which the discussion about the Orders in Council was steadily bringing on. On the 16th May, about 14 or 15 leagues from Cape Charles, Captain Bingham, of the British sloop of war *Little Belt*, at that time looking for her consort, the *Guerriere*, for which she had dispatches, came in sight of a frigate, with which, on the supposition that she might be the *Guerriere*, Captain Bingham endeavoured to close. When he had approached sufficiently near, he displayed his private signals; and on these not being answered, he took it for granted that the frigate was an American, abandoned the pursuit, and steered to the south. The frigate in question was the *President*, Commodore Rogers, which was cruising in those waters, as one of the home squadron, for the protection of the commerce of the United States. The *President*, from some motive on the part of her commander which it seems hard to reconcile with amicable intentions, gave chase to the other vessel, so soon as the latter had changed her course. The pursuit of the *Little Belt*, in the first instance, was afterwards accounted for in the manner we have already stated; but, even at the time, it would naturally have occurred to the Commander of the *President* that his ship must have been mistaken by the other for either a British or French vessel, and whether that other was British or French could have made no difference to him, as his nation was not at war with either Great Britain or France. Why, then, should he have given chase? He had no antagonist at sea. But, to proceed. As the *President* was evidently gaining, Captain Bingham, deeming it advisable to speak the stranger before dark, lay to at half-past six o'clock,—having by that time discerned the stars in the *President's* broad pennant,—and, to guard against surprise, prepared his ship for action. The other approached slowly, with a light breeze, and, as if with hostile intentions, made several efforts to secure the weatherly gage, which, after having been frustrated in some three

or four times, by Captain Bingham's manœuvres, she at length succeeded obtaining. At about a quarter past eight, the vessels were within hail, the distance between them being less than a hundred yards. Up to this hour the accounts on both sides agree; but here we meet with a most perplexing discrepancy in the narratives of the two commanders. Captain Bingham thus states the matter: "I hailed, and asked what ship it was? He repeated my question. I again hailed, and asked what ship it was? He again repeated my words, and fired a broadside, which I immediately returned." Commodore Rogers, on the other hand, gave in this statement: "I hailed, What ship is that? To this inquiry no answer was given; but I was hailed by her commander, What ship is that? After a pause of fifteen or twenty seconds, I reiterated my first inquiry; and before I had time to take the trumpet from my mouth was answered by a shot, that went into our mainmast." The action, however brought on, became general, and lasted for about three-quarters of an hour, at the end of which time the fire of the *Little Belt* was silenced, as she was reduced almost to a wreck, and none of her guns could be brought to bear. Commodore Rogers stated, that, after four or five minutes he desisted from firing, as he perceived that his adversary was very inferior: but the officers of the *Little Belt* made no mention of this pause. After the action, Commodore Rogers hailed again, and ascertained the name and character of his small,* but spirited antagonist. He then gave his own, after which the two vessels separated for the night. In the morning, the Commander of the *President* sent a boat on board the *Little Belt*, with a message, expressing his regret that the unfortunate collision had taken place, and tendering assistance to his crippled adversary,—an offer which Captain Bingham declined. The *Little Belt* then made the best of her way to Halifax, severely damaged, with eleven

* A glance at the plate will show the reader the vast difference in size between the vessels. We may take this opportunity of remarking, that, with but two or three exceptions, there was a disparity of force, in favor of the enemy, in every naval action throughout the war.