

VICTORIOUS UNION

by Oliver Optic

Chapter 2: The Departure of the Expedition

The conversation between the captain and the executive officer of the *Bellevite* was continued till they were called to supper; but a decision had been reached. On important occasions, as when several boats were ordered upon an expedition, it was not unusual to send the first lieutenant in command. Though only a single whale boat would be required for the enterprise in which the commander was so deeply interested, its importance appeared to justify the selection of the executive officer to conduct it; and Christy was directed to suit himself.

Of course the expedition was to be sent out at night, for the cover of the darkness was necessary to render it effectual. In the afternoon the wind had come around to the south-west, and already a slight fog had obscured the Sand Island Lighthouse. It promised to be such a night as a blockade-runner would select for getting to sea.

Christy was especially warned that the principal business of his expedition was to obtain information in regard to the *Trafalgar*, though it was probable that a new name had been given to her for the service in which she was to be engaged. The examination of the surroundings of the fort, the captain strongly impressed upon his mind, was entirely subsidiary to the discovery of the intending blockade-runner. In fact, the commander seemed to have serious doubts as to whether it was proper for him even to reconnoitre without special orders for the use of the army.

It was several months that Christy had been on board of the *Bellevite* in his present capacity, and he had become very well acquainted with all the petty officers and seamen of the ship's company, now composed of one hundred and twenty men. After he had finished his supper he walked about the spar-deck to refresh his memory by a sight at all of the men, and selected those who were to take part in his enterprise.

One of the first persons he encountered in his promenade was the third assistant engineer, Charles Graines, whom he had known as a boy, before the war. He was not only a machinist, but a sailor, having served in both capacities, though now only twenty-five years of age. Through his father Christy had procured his appointment as an engineer, and his assignment to the *Bellevite*. The young man was exceedingly grateful to him for this service, and entirely devoted to him.

Paul Vapoor, the chief engineer, spoke of Graines in the high estterms, not only in his official capacity, but as a high-toned, patriotic, and thoroughly reliable man. The moment the executive officer put his eye on the assistant engineer, he decided that Graines should be his right-hand man. As a matter of precaution the proposed expedition was to be a profound secret, for there were white men and negroes about the deck who had been picked up in various ways, and were retained till they could be disposed of. They could not be trusted, and doubtless some of them were Confederates at heart, if not engaged in secret missions.

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Christy invited Graines to the ward room for a conference. There were several officers there, and they retired to the stateroom of the first lieutenant, which is the forward one on the starboard side. The plan, as it had been matured in the mind of the one appointed to carry it out, was fully explained, and the engineer was delighted to be chosen to take part in its execution. The selection of the seamen to compose the expedition was not an easy matter, though every sailor on board would have volunteered for such duty if the opportunity had been presented to him.

Graines was not so familiar with the merits of the seamen as he was with those of the men in the engineer department. It became necessary for the executive officer to take another walk on the spar-deck, in order to revive his recollection of the men; and he soon returned to the stateroom with a complete list of those he had selected. The engineer suggested an oiler by the name of Weeks as a most excellent man; and Christy accepted him, completing the number from those of his own choice. Seated at his desk, he wrote out the names of the ten men chosen.

“Of course if we should be caught on shore in our ordinary uniforms it would be all night with us,” said Christy, as he completed the writing out of the list. “I believe you have never seen the inside of a Confederate prison, Mr. Graines.”

“Never; though I came pretty near it once while I was an oiler on board of the *Hatteras*,” replied the engineer.

“You have been fortunate, and I hope you will come out of this excursion as well. I spent a short time in a Confederate lock-up; but I did not like the arrangements, and I took leave of it one night. It was in Mobile, and I don’t care to be sent up there again. Therefore we must clothe ourselves in the worst garments we can find; and I carry a suit for just this purpose, though I have not had occasion to use it lately.”

“I have to wear old clothes when at work on the machinery, and I have a plentiful supply on hand,” added Graines. “Perhaps I could help out some of the others.”

“All the seamen have old clothes, and they will need no assistance in arranging their wardrobes. Now, Mr. Graines, it will excite remark if I instruct the ten men we have selected, and I must leave that part of the work to you,” continued Christy. “But all the instruction you need give them is in regard to their dress, and require them to be at the main chains on the starboard side at ten o’clock to-night precisely.”

“As I have plenty of time I will take the men, one at a time, to my room in the steerage, and instruct them,” replied the engineer.

“You can tell each one to send in the next one wanted. Above all, make them promise not to speak to any person whatever in regard to the expedition,” said the executive officer as his companion retired.

Mr. Graines lost no time in discharging the important duty assigned to him. Christy reported to the commander, as soon as he found an opportunity to speak to him privately, what progress he had made in carrying out the duty assigned to him. Captain Breaker looked over the list of the men selected, and gave it his hearty approbation. He was a man of elevated moral and religious character; he had always exercised a sort of fatherly supervision over his ship’s company, and he was better acquainted with those under his command than most commanders.



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“It looks as though it was going to be a good night for blockade-runners, Mr. Passford,” said Captain Breaker, as he looked over to windward and saw the banks of fog, not yet very dense, rolling up from the open gulf.

“It is not known, I suppose, whether or not the Trafalgar has come down from Mobile?” inquired Christy.

“I have been unable to obtain any definite information; but a negro who came off from the shore yesterday assured me there was a black steamer at anchor between the Middle Ground and Mobile Point. That is all the information I have been able to obtain, though I have examined all who came on board during the last week. It is certainly time for the Trafalgar to come out, as the Confederates are in great haste to re-enforce the Alabama, the Shenandoah, and other cruisers; for these vessels have made a tremendous impression upon our mercantile marine. She has been in port long enough to rebuild her already, and I am confident she must be ready for service.”

“If I don’t find her ready to come out to-night, would it not be well to repeat my visit to the shore until we learn something about her?” asked Christy.

“That is my purpose,” replied the commander.

“I should like to have the scope of my powers as the officer of this expedition a little more definitely defined, Captain Breaker,” continued the first lieutenant.

“I thought I had fully instructed you, Christy,” answered the commander with a smile.

“Am I to confine myself solely to the two points assigned to me?”

“I don’t understand what you have in your mind, my boy.”

“I have nothing in my mind, Captain. I have not laid out any plan of operations outside of the instructions you have given me, sir; and I do not purpose to do so. If I had the intention to do anything but the duty assigned to me, I should assuredly inform you of it, and obtain your orders.”

“I know you would, my dear boy.”

“But if I see an opportunity to do anything for the benefit of my country”—

“Such as the capture of a sloop of war,” interposed the commander with a suggestive laugh. “When you were sent to look out for a small steamer, simply to obtain information in regard to her, in Pensacola Bay, you went on your mission, and brought out the Teaser, which afterwards became the Bronx, and rendered very valuable service to the country under your command.”

“I could not very well help doing so when I saw my opportunity,” replied Christy, in an apologetic tone, as though he had been reproved for exceeding his instructions.

“You did precisely right, Christy; and that act did more to make the deservedly high reputation you have won than almost anything else you have done, unless it was your achievements at Cedar Keys,” added Captain Breaker heartily.

“I am glad you have brought up the Teaser matter, Captain, for it just illustrates what I have in my mind. If I see an opportunity to do such a thing as that on the present occasion, I simply wish to know whether or not I am to confine my operations to the strict letter of my instructions. Of course, if so instructed, I shall obey my orders to the letter.”

“‘The letter killeth, the spirit giveth life,’ my boy. Your mission always and everywhere is to serve your country, and you are to do this on the present occasion. What I said about ingenuity in



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speaking of my officers is covered in this case. If you can capture and send out the *Trafalgar*, do it by all means, for that is the object in view in sending off this expedition. Your head is level, Christy; and that is the reason why I desired you to command this enterprise rather than either of the other officers. I can trust you, and you have full powers to act on your own judgment.”

“I thank you for your abundant confidence, Captain; and I shall endeavor not to abuse it,” replied Christy. “But it is not even remotely possible that I shall capture the *Trafalgar*; yet sometimes unexpected opportunities are presented, and the letter of my orders might prevent me from embracing them. I am very glad to know where I stand.”

The night came on, and with it more fog; but it was of that flitting kind which settles down and then blows away. It seemed to come in banks that were continually in motion. The men who were to go to the shore had all been instructed, and at precisely ten o’clock they were seated in the whaleboat, with Mr. Graines in the stern sheets. They were all armed with two revolvers apiece, and there was a cutlass for each in the boat. The men had not only changed their dress, but they had disguised themselves, smooching their faces with coal dust, and tearing their garments till they were in tatters.

Christy had dressed himself in his old garments, but added to them a gray coat he had obtained on board of a prize. The watch on deck had been ordered to the fore-castle, so that they need not too closely observe the crew of the whaleboat. The chief of the expedition had quietly descended to the platform of the after gangway, and when the boat dropped astern, he stepped into it, selecting his place by the side of the engineer, who had taken the tiller lines. The boat pulled away at once, with four hands at the oars, and Mr. Graines headed it to the north-east by the compass, the sidelights of which were covered so that they should not betray the approach of the boat to the shore, if any one was there.

On the way Christy gave the men full instructions in regard to their conduct; and in less than an hour the party landed.

