

# A VICTORIOUS UNION

by Oliver Optic

## *Chapter 5: In the Vicinity of the Confederate Fort*

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It was a favorable night for running the blockade, for the fog had settled down more densely upon the region in the vicinity of the ship channel, though it occasionally lifted, and permitted those on board of the *Bellevite* to see the tall tower of the Sand Island Lighthouse, which had not been illuminated for three years. The mists were generally thicker and remained longer towards daylight than at any other time, and this was the evident reason why three o'clock in the morning had been fixed upon for the departure of the *Trafalgar* and the *West Wind* in tow.

The engineer's head was as clear as it had ever been, notwithstanding the tipsy swaying and doubling-up of his body which he simulated, and he realized that his companion and himself had obtained very important revelations from the revellers. The hour at which the steamer was to leave, evidently by arrangement with the officers of the fort, was valuable knowledge, and he hoped they would be able to carry or send seasonable warning of the time to the *Bellevite*, for she was the only ship on the blockade that could be counted upon to overhaul the *Trafalgar*, if the reports of her great speed had been correctly given.

Both Christy and Graines had listened attentively to the revelations of Bird Riley; but neither of them could understand why the four men, including the mate, had deserted the *West Wind* only a few hours before she was to depart on her voyage to Nassau, where she was believed to be bound. The reason assigned by the tipsy mate was that she was going out in tow of the steamer, and was sure to be taken by the blockaders. Both of the listeners thought this fact improved her chances of getting clear of any possible pursuers.

Bird Riley had fallen back on the ground; but he still continued to talk, though his speech was very nearly incoherent. Graines was very anxious to know what time it was, for the most important part of the enterprise was to give the *Bellevite* timely notice of the coming of the *Trafalgar*. He struck a match and lighted a cigar, offering one to the mate, which he took and lighted. It was half-past twelve by his watch, as he informed Bird, though he did so more for the information of the lieutenant than of the mate.

"I reckon we are all about full enough to go to sleep, and we might as well turn in," said Graines. "But I suppose you uns mean to sleep on board of the *West Wind*."

"I don't reckon we'll do nothin' o' that sort," hiccoughed the mate. "We done got a p'int to kerry, and I reckon we're gwine to kerry it."

"All right," gobbled the engineer, who overdid his part, if anything. "What's the p'int, shipmate?"

"Cap'n Sull'dine's sho't handed," replied the mate, his speech turning somersets as he labored to



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utter the words, for he still had a portion of his senses left.

"I see," added Graines, tumbling over, but regaining his perpendicularity with a trying effort. "Only six men left after you four done runned away."

"Six!" exclaimed Bird, raising himself up with a desperate struggle, like a wounded hawk. "No six in it; only two left. He don't, can't no how, go to sea with only two men. I'll pilot the schooner out by the Belican Channel an' Mis'sip' Sound. Cap'n Sull'dine 'n' I fit over it, an' I left, with most of the crew. Hah, ha, ha! He done got 'nuff on't! Let's take a swigger, and then we gwine to go to sleep, like the rest on 'em."

With no little difficulty Bird Riley got the bottle to his lips, wasting no little of the liquor in the operation. He was entirely "full" then. He handed the bottle to the engineer, and dropped over on his back, overcome by his frequent potions. Graines did not find it necessary to go through the form of putting the bottle to his lips again, and after waiting a few minutes he was satisfied that the mate was in a deep slumber, from which he was not likely to wake for several hours.

But all the information he appeared to be capable of giving had been imparted, and Graines rose to his feet as steady as he ever was in his life, having taken hardly a swallow of the repulsive poison. He walked away from the sleeping group on the ground, halting about twenty feet from them. Christy saw him, for his eyes were open all the time, and he had listened with intense interest to the conversation between the engineer and the mate of the West Wind.

The lieutenant straightened himself up and looked about him. The fire was entirely extinguished; the four men lay with their feet to the embers, and not one of them showed any signs of life. Carefully raising himself to his feet, so as not to disturb the sleeper nearest to him, he crept away to the spot where his associate awaited him. Christy led the way in the direction of the fort, but both of them were silent till they reached the summit of the knoll which concealed the inner bay from their vision, or would have done so if the fog had not effectually veiled it from their sight.

"I suppose you heard all that was said, Mr. Passford, after you ceased to lead the conversation," said Graines, as he glanced back at the foot of the hollow where the revel had taken place.

"Every word of it; and I could insert a good deal of what might have been read between the lines if the talk had been written out," replied the lieutenant. "As you were the cousin of the mate, he seemed to be more communicative to you than to me, and I thought it best to leave you to conduct the conversation. You did it extremely well, Charley, and there was no occasion for me to interfere. I find that you have no little skill as a detective, as well as a sailor and an engineer, and I shall make a good report of you to Captain Breaker. I could almost believe that we were boys together again as we were carrying on the farce this evening."

"Thank you, Christy—Mr. Passford," added Graines.

"You need not stand on ship formalities while we are alone, Charley. But we must put together the threads we have gathered this evening, and, if I mistake not, we shall make a net of them, into which the Trafalgar, or whatever her new name may be, will tumble at no very distant time. It appears that she is not to tow out the West Wind, for Captain Sullendine cannot go to sea with only two men before the mast, and no mate."

"Bird Riley played his cards very well to accomplish the purpose he had in view, which was to



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keep the West Wind from going to sea in tow of the steamer,” replied Graines, keeping up with the lieutenant, who had taken a very rapid pace.

“I should say that the schooner would have a much better chance to get through the blockaders in tow of the Trafalgar than in going on her own hook. Bird is a big fellow in his own estimation; but it struck me that Captain Sullendine had an ignorant and self-willed fellow for a mate, and probably he took the best one he could find; for I think good seamen, outside of the Confederate navy, must be very scarce in the South.”

“The fellow had a notion in his head that he could take the schooner out by Pelican Channel, and he quarrelled with the captain on this point. It occurred to me that he deserted his vessel on account of the quarrel rather than for any other reason.”

“We need not bother our heads with that question, for it does not concern us; and we will leave the captain and his mate to fight it out when they meet to-morrow, for it is plain enough that the West Wind cannot go to sea with no mate and only two hands before the mast,” returned Christy, who was hastening forward to discharge what he considered his first duty thus far developed by the events of the night. “What time is it now, Charley? I have a watch, but no matches.”

The engineer’s cigar had gone out when he lighted it before, and he had put it in a pocket of his sack coat. Putting it in his mouth, he struck a match, and consulted his watch.

“Quarter of one, Christy; and we have plenty of time,” he replied as he lighted his cigar; for he thought it would help him to maintain his indifference in whatever event might be next in order.

“But we have no time to spare,” added the lieutenant, as he increased the rapidity of his pace. “Our five pairs of men must have readied the vicinity of the fort before this time, for we have had a long conference with those spreeists.”

“About an hour and a half; and the information we have obtained will fully pay for the time used.”

“No doubt of it; and we must hurry up in order to make a good use of it,” said Christy. “The fog is lifting just now, as it has been doing all the evening, and we can see the fort. There are very few people about; for it cannot be an uncommon event to see a blockade-runner get under way.”

It was not probable that any of the persons in sight were soldiers, for they had abundant opportunity to see all there was to be seen within the solid walls that sheltered them. The rapid pace at which the lieutenant led his companion soon brought them to the group of people near the shore of the channel leading to Pilot Town. The five pairs of seamen were well scattered about, as they had been instructed to be, and they did not appear to have attracted the attention of the others in the vicinity.

Pair No. Three were the first of the party the officers encountered, and no others appeared to be near them. One of them was smoking his pipe, and both of them were taking it very easily. Not far from them was a knot of men who seemed to be disturbed by some kind of an excitement. As the couple encountered manifested no interest in the affair, Christy concluded that they must know something about it, unless they were extremely scrupulous in adhering to the orders given them.

“What is the row there, French?” asked Christy in a low and guarded tone, though there was no stranger very near him.

“The man in the middle is the captain of that schooner you see off the shore, sir. His mate and



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three of his crew have deserted the vessel, and he can't go to sea without them," replied French.

"They say the steamer ahead is to tow the schooner out; but the captain cannot go because he has only two men left," added Lines, the other man of the pair.

"Do you know where to find Nos. One and Two?" continued the leader of the expedition.

"I do not, sir; for we keep clear of each other, as we were ordered," answered French, as he looked about him for the men designated.

"You two will separate, and find One and Two. Send them to me, and I will wait here for them," added Christy; and the men departed on the errand. "While I am waiting for them, Mr. Graines, you may go down to that group, and pick up what information you can."

The engineer sauntered down the declivity, smoking his cigar, and making himself as much at home on the enemy's territory as though he had been the commander of the Confederate fort. Christy was not kept long in waiting, and the first pair that reported to him were Weeks and Bingham. No. One. The former was the oiler who had been selected on account of his ingenuity and good judgment by Graines.

"Are you a sailor as well as a machinist, Weeks?" asked Christy.

"I am not much of a sailor, sir, though I have handled a schooner. I have been a boatman more or less of the time all my life," replied the oiler modestly.

By this time No. Two, Lane and McGrady, reported, but French and Lines kept their distance, in conformity with the spirit of their orders.

"Nos. One and Two will return to the whaleboat, and Weeks will be in command of the party," continued Christy. "The rest of you will obey him as your officer. Is this understood?"

"Ay, ay, sir," responded the three men.

"Weeks, you will carry the boat to the water, and return to the ship with all possible haste. Inform Captain Breaker that the Trafalgar will sail at three o'clock in the morning. I will report to him later."

The four men started off as though they meant to obey this order to the letter.

