

VICTORIOUS UNION

by Oliver Optic

Chapter 7: A Powerful Ally of the Bellevites

The seamen of the Bellevite had listened with intense interest to the conversation between the commander of the West Wind and the lieutenant; and there was not a single one of them who did not comprehend the purpose of the chief of the expedition. They were greatly amused at the manner in which Christy conducted himself, and especially at the mongrel dialect he had used. It was a little difficult for them to realize that the awkward fellow who was in conversation with the skipper of the schooner was the gentlemanly, well-spoken officer they had been accustomed to see on the quarter-deck of the Bellevite.

They separated as they had been instructed to do; but they were careful not to go to any great distance from the spot, for they understood that they should be wanted in a few minutes. Graines had not spoken a word on this occasion, though he had done most of the talking at the bivouac. He was ready to do his part; but the skipper had addressed his companion first, introducing the subject, and he had no opportunity to get in a single word.

“I suppose you understand it all, Charley,” said Christy as soon as they were alone.

“I could not very well have helped doing so if I had tried. The only thing that bothered me was when you appeared to be betraying yourself by alluding to the mate,” replied Graines.

“I did not do that by accident; but I desired to get the whole attention of the captain, and I got it. The rest all followed in due course. Now tell all the men to go down to the shore, and wait a little distance from the two boats till you and I join them. Tell them all to be hungry. Your name is Mr. Balker, the mate of the Rattler, the blockade-runner from which we escaped in a whaleboat. My name is Jerry Sandman, the second mate, for the want of a better. Tell them not to forget any of these names,” continued Christy.

“They heard the whole story, and they were deeply interested in it, for they could not help seeing what was coming,” added the engineer, as he went to carry out the order he had just received.

The seamen still kept together in pairs, and Graines instructed them by twos, impressing them with the necessity of remembering the names they had heard in the lieutenant’s story, which was a “story” in the double sense of the word. As each couple received their lesson, they sauntered in the direction of the shore.

“What’s going to be done, Mr. Graines?” asked French, who was one of the second pair the engineer instructed.

“That is none of your business, French. You are to remember the names I have given you, and then obey orders,” replied Graines rather sharply, for it was a very unusual thing for a seaman, or even an officer, to ask such a question of his superior; and the discipline of the Bellevite was as exacting as



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it was kind and fatherly.

“Excuse me, Mr. Graines; I only wanted to be ready for whatever was coming,” pleaded French.

“Excused; but don’t ask such questions. You listened to the conversation between your officer and the captain of the schooner; and if you cannot comprehend the meaning of it, ask Lines, and he will explain it,” added the engineer, “Where are Londall and Vogel?”

“Right by that pile of rubbish, sir,” replied French, as he led the way to the shore.

The last pair were instructed and sent with the others, and they asked no questions. Graines joined the lieutenant, who had seated himself on a log, and reported that all was going on right.

“As I said before, Charley, you will be the mate of the Rattler, and will no doubt be engaged for the same position on board of the West Wind. I will ship as second mate, if one of the two men now on board of the vessel is not shipped as such, for I wish to be among the men,” said Christy, after looking about him to see that no one was within hearing distance of them.

“I take it I shall not make a long voyage as mate,” replied Graines.

“Probably not, though I cannot tell how long you will have to serve in that capacity. I purpose to have the Tallahatchie tow the schooner as far down as practicable; but we shall doubtless have business on our hands before it is time to cut the towline. Now we will wait upon the captain.”

They found him walking up and down the shore, apparently somewhat excited; and doubtless he had not entire confidence in the promises of “Jerry Sandman.” The six seamen had not joined Captain Sullendine on the shore, but had placed themselves behind a coal shanty quite near the water.

“I’ve brought the mate down, Cap’n Sull’dine,” Christy began, as he and the engineer halted in front of the master of the schooner. “Here he is, an’ I reckon there ain’t no better sailor in the great Confed’racy. This yere is Mr. Balker.”

“How are ye, Mr. Balker? You are just the man I want more’n I want my supper. Now tell me something about yourself.”

Graines invented a story suited to the occasion. Then the conversation was about wages; and the candidate haggled for form’s sake, but finally accepted the lay the captain offered.

“By the way, Captain Sullendine, do you happen to have a second mate?” asked the engineer when the terms were arranged.

“I had one; but he run away with Bird Riley. He wa’n’t good for nothin’, and I’m glad he’s gone,” replied the skipper.

“The man you talked with is Jerry Sandman, and he was the other mate of the Rattler. He isn’t a showy fellow, but he was a first-class second mate,” continued Graines.

“Then I ship him as second mate;” and they arranged the wages without much difficulty.

The six seamen were promptly shipped. The whole party then embarked in the two boats, Captain Sullendine dividing them into two parties for the purpose. The fog had settled down very densely upon the shore; but the West Wind was easily found, and they went on board, where one boat was hoisted up to the stern davits, and the other on the port quarter.

“Here you be, Mr. Balker,” said Captain Sullendine when the party reached the quarter-deck; and he was so lively in his movements, and so glib in his speech, as to provoke the suspicion that he had imbibed again at the conclusion of his oration on shore. “Here, you, Sopsy!” he continued in a loud



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voice.

A lantern was burning on the companion, which enabled the party to see that the waist of the vessel was compactly packed with bales of cotton. The schooner seemed to be of considerable size, and Christy thought she must be loaded with a very large cargo of the precious merchandise. In answer to the captain's call, Sopsy, who proved to be the negro cook of the vessel, presented himself.

"All these people want something to eat, Sopsy. Let the crew eat in the deck-house for'ad, and bring a lunch into the cabin right off," continued Captain Sullendine.

"Yis, sar," replied the cook with emphasis. "Git 'em quicker'n a man kin swaller his own head. Libes dar a man wid soul so dead"—

"Never mind the varse, Sopsy," interposed the captain.

"—As never to hisself have said"—

"Hurry up, Sopsy!"

"He don't say dat, Massa Cap'n," added the cook, as he shuffled off over the bales of cotton.

"Hullo there, Bokes! Where are you, Bokes?" called the captain again.

"On deck, Cap'n," replied a white man, crawling out from a small opening in the bales.

"Wake up, Bokes! You ain't dead yet."

"No, sir; wide awake's a coon in a hencoop," added the man, who appeared to be one of the two left on board by the deserters, the cook being the other.

"Be alive, Bokes! Here, wait a minute!" and the captain ran down the companion ladder to the cabin, from which he presently appeared with a bottle in each hand. "Do you see them men on the cotton, Bokes?" he asked, pointing with one of them at the six Belleviters, who stood where they had taken their stations after hoisting up the quarter-boat.

"I see sunthin over thar," replied the seaman, who seemed to be hardly awake yet.

"Them's the new crew I shipped to-night—six on 'em, or seven with the second mate," added the captain. "Show 'em over to the deck-house, and let 'em pick out their bunks."

"Seven on 'em; the cook and me makes nine, and they ain't but eight berths in the deck-house, Cap'n," replied Bokes, who seemed to be afraid of losing his own sleeping quarters.

"You can sleep on the deck, then. These are all good men, and they must have good berths," added the captain. "You can sleep as well in the scuppers as anywhere else, Bokes; and you ain't more'n half awake any time."

"Must have my berth, Cap'n, or I go ashore," persisted the seaman.

"Small loss anyhow," growled the captain.

"How is the cabin, Captain Sullendine?" interposed Graines.

"Two staterooms and four berths," replied the master.

"Then why can't the second mate take one of the berths in the cabin?" suggested the new mate. "He is a first-rate fellow, and I reckon he's a better sailor than I am, for he's been to sea about all his life."

"'Tain't reg'lar to have the second mate in the cabin. He'll have t'eat with us if he bunks there," argued the master.

"He'll have to keep his watch on deck when we eat, and I reckon he'll have to take his grub



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alone,” reasoned the mate.

“I’d ruther live in the deck-house with the crew,” said Christy.

“But there ain’t no room thar,” added Graines, who thought his superior had made the remark simply to keep up his character.

“Let him come into the cabin, then,” said Captain Sullendine, in order to settle the question.

“Now, Bokes, take this apple-jack, and show the other six to the deck-house. Give ‘em one or two drinks all round. It’ll do ‘em good.”

Bokes obeyed the order, after the master had lighted another lantern for his use, and he went over the bales of cotton to the seamen.

Captain Sullendine remarked with great complacency that he always treated his men well, gave them enough to eat and drink, and he thought the apple-jack he had sent them would do them good. He liked to be liberal with his crew, for he believed a tot of grog would go further with them than “cussin’ ‘em;” and the two mates did not gainsay him, though they believed in neither grog nor “cussin’.”

Though Christy never drank a drop of intoxicating fluid under any circumstances, and Graines almost never, both of them believed that “apple-jack” had been a very serviceable ally during the night so far. Rut they considered it useful only in the hands of the enemy, and they were sorry to see the bottles sent forward for the use of Belleviters; for they were afraid some of them might muddle and tangle their brains with the fiery liquor.

“Come, mates, let’s go down into the cabin now,” continued the captain, descending the ladder without waiting for them.

“I will go forward for a few minutes, Charley,” whispered Christy in the ear of the engineer, who followed the captain below.

When the lieutenant reached the deck-house he found the men there, with Bokes in the act of taking a long pull at one of the bottles, while French was holding the other.

“Here’s the second mate,” said the seaman with the bottle.

“You can keep the bottle you have, Bokes,” said Christy. “Now go aft with it.” The sleepy sailor was willing enough to obey such a welcome order, and the lieutenant took the other bottle to the side and emptied it into the water. The men did not object, and the new second mate joined the master in the cabin.

