

A VICTORIOUS UNION

by Oliver Optic

Chapter 1: The Mission to Mobile Point

“I almost wish you were the second or the third lieutenant of the *Bellevite*, instead of the executive officer, Christy,” said Captain Breaker, the commander of the steamer, as they were seated together one day on the quarter-deck.

“Do I fail in the discharge of my duty in my present position, Captain?” asked Christy, very much astonished, not to say startled, at the remark of the commander.

“Not in the slightest degree, my dear boy!” returned Captain Breaker with very decided emphasis. “You have served in your present capacity for four months; and if you were fifty years old, and had twenty years of naval experience behind you, it would be hardly possible for you to be more correct and dignified in the performance of the details of your office.”

“I thank you, Captain, for the partial view you take of what I have done,” added Christy, taking off his cap and bowing to his superior.

“Well, you ought to be a good officer in any situation, my dear fellow,” continued the commander. “I doubt if there is another officer in the navy who has enjoyed the advantages you have had in preparing himself for the duties of his profession. You were brought up, so to say, on board of the *Bellevite*. You were a good scholar in the first place. Without including myself, you have had excellent teachers in every department of science and philosophy, among whom your father was one of the wisest. Poor Dashington was one of the best seamen that ever trod a deck; and he took especial delight in showing you how to make every knot and splice, as well as in instructing you in the higher details of practical seamanship. Blowitt and myself assisted him, and old Boxie, who gave his life to his country, was more than a grandfather to you.”

“I have certainly been very grateful to you and to them for all they did for me,” replied Christy with a sad expression on his handsome face as the commander recalled the three shipmates of both of them who slept in heroes’ graves.

“Perhaps the brilliant genius of our engine-room did quite as much for you as any other person, though not many years your senior.”

“Paul Vapoor is my friend and crony; and if he had been my professor in a college he could have done no more for me. I assure you, Captain, that I keep alive my gratitude to all my instructors, including some you have not mentioned.”

“I was only explaining why you are what you ought to be, for you have had very exceptional opportunities, better by far than any other officer in the service. But it is altogether to your credit that you have used those opportunities wisely and well.”

“I should have been a blockhead if I had not.”



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“That is very true; but the mournful wrecks of wasted opportunities strew the tracks of many, many young men. I think you can look back upon as few of them as any one within my knowledge,” said the commander, bestowing a look of genuine affection upon his chief officer. “More than once, even before we entered upon this terrible war, I have told your father how happy he ought to be in having such a son as you are.”

“Come, come, Captain Breaker, you are praising me!” exclaimed Christy impatiently.

“I am speaking only the simple truth, and I have very rarely said as much as I say now. It was when you asked me if you had failed in the discharge of the duties of your present position that I was led into this line of remark; and I am sure you will not be spoiled by honest and just praise,” replied the captain.

“Then, to go back to the point where you began, why do you almost wish that I were second or third lieutenant, instead of executive officer, of the *Bellevite*, Captain?” continued Christy, rising from his seat, and fixing an earnest gaze upon the face of the commander, for he was very sensitive, and he could not help feeling that he had been lacking in something that would make him a better executive officer than he was.

“Mr. Ballard, the second lieutenant, and Mr. Walbrook, the third, are gentlemen of the highest grade, and excellent officers; but they are both somewhat wanting in dash and cool impetuosity.”

“‘Cool impetuosity’ is very good, Captain,” added Christy with a laugh.

“But that is precisely what I mean, my boy, and no two words could express the idea any better. You cannot carry an enemy by boarding with the same precision you man the yards on a ceremonious occasion, or as a regiment of soldiers go on dress parade. It requires vim, dash, spirit. The officers named have this quality in a very considerable degree, yet not enough of it. But what they lack more is ingenuity, fertility in expedients, and the expansive view which enables them to take advantage promptly of circumstances. You never lose your head, Christy.”

“I never knew the gentlemen named to lose their heads, and I have always regarded them as model officers,” replied the first lieutenant.

“And so they are: you are quite right, my dear boy; but it is possible for them to be all you say, and yet, like the young man of great possessions in the Scripture, to lack one thing. I should not dare to exchange my second and third lieutenants for any others if I had the opportunity.”

“I confess that I do not understand you yet, Captain.”

The commander rose from his seat, stretched himself, and then looked about the deck. Taking his camp-stool in his hand he carried it over to the port side of the quarter-deck, and planted it close to the bulwarks. The second lieutenant was the officer of the deck, and was pacing the planks on the starboard side, while the lookouts in the foretop and on the top-gallant fore-castle were attending closely to their duty, doubtless with a vision of more prize money floating through their brains.

The *Bellevite*, with the fires banked in the furnaces, was at anchor off the entrance to Mobile Bay, about two miles east of Sand Island Lighthouse, and the same distance south of the narrow neck of land on the western extremity of which Fort Morgan is located. Her commander had chosen this position for a purpose; for several weeks before, while the *Bellevite* was absent on a special mission, a remarkably fast steamer called the *Trafalgar* had run the blockade inward.



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Captain Passford, Senior, through his agents in England, had some information in regard to this vessel, which he had sent to Captain Breaker. Unlike most of the blockade-runners built for this particular service, she had been constructed in the most substantial manner for an English millionaire, who had insisted that she should be built as strong as the best of steel could make her, for he intended to make a voyage around the world in her.

Unfortunately for the owner of the *Trafalgar*, who was a lineal descendant of a titled commander in that great naval battle, he fell from his horse in a fox chase, and was killed before the steamer was fully completed. His heir had no taste for the sea, and the steamer was sold at a price far beyond her cost; and the purchaser had succeeded in getting her into Mobile Bay with a valuable cargo. She was of about eight hundred tons burden, and it was said that she could steam twenty knots an hour. She was believed to be the equal of the *Alabama* and the *Shenandoah*. The *Bellevite* had been especially notified not to allow the *Trafalgar* to escape. She had recently had her bottom cleaned, and her engine put in perfect order for the service expected of her, for she was the fastest vessel on the blockade.

When Captain Breaker had assured himself that he was out of hearing of the officer of the deck, he invited Christy to take a seat at his side. He spoke in a low tone, and was especially careful that no officer should hear him.

“Perhaps I meddle with what does not concern me, Christy; but I cannot help having ideas of my own,” said the commander, when he was satisfied that no one but the executive officer could hear him. “There is Fort Morgan, with Fort Gaines three miles from it on the other side of the channel. Mobile Point, as it is called at this end of the neck, extends many miles to the eastward. It is less than two miles wide where it is broadest, and not over a quarter of a mile near Pilot Town.”

“I have studied the lay of the land very carefully, for I have had some ideas of my own,” added Christy, as the commander paused.

“If Fort Morgan had been Fort Sumter, with bad memories clinging to it, an effort would have been made to capture it, either by bombardment by the navy, or by regular approaches on the part of the army,” continued Captain Breaker. “They are still pounding away at Fort Sumter, because there would be a moral in its capture and the reduction of Charleston, for the war began there. Such an event would send a wave of rejoicing through the North, though it would be of less real consequence than the opening of Mobile Bay and the cleaning out of the city of Mobile. Except Wilmington, it is the most pestilent resort for blockade-runners on the entire coast.”

“Then you think Fort Morgan can be reduced from the land side?” asked Christy, deeply interested in the conversation.

“I have little doubt of it; and while I believe Farragut will resort to his favorite plan of running by the forts here, as he has done by those of the Mississippi, the army will be planted in the rear of both these forts. As we have lain here for months, I have studied the situation, and I want to know something more about the land on the east of Mobile Point.”

“I should say that it would be easy enough to obtain all the information you desire in regard to it,” suggested Christy.

“There is an unwritten tradition that the commander must not leave his ship to engage in any duty of an active character, and I cannot explore the vicinity of the fort myself.”



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“But you have plenty of officers for such duty.”

“I have no doubt there are pickets, and perhaps a camp beyond the rising ground, and the exploration would be difficult and dangerous. The two officers I have mentioned before lack the dash and ingenuity such an enterprise requires; and a blunder might involve me in difficulty, for I have no orders to obtain the information I desire.”

“The officers named are prudent men within reasonable limits.”

“They are; but I would give up my idea rather than trust either of them with this duty,” replied Captain Breaker very decidedly. “But I have a further and nearer object in this exploration; in fact, examining the ground would be only secondary.”

“What is the real object, Captain?” asked the first lieutenant, his curiosity fully awakened.

“I feel that it will be necessary to use extraordinary efforts to capture the Trafalgar, for no steamer of her alleged speed has ever run into or out of Mobile Bay. After I informed the flag-officer in regard to her, which your father’s information enabled me to do, the Bellevite was especially charged with the duty of capturing her, if she had to chase her all over the world.”

“I have not much doubt that you will do it, Captain.”

“I mean to do so if possible. Now these blockade-runners usually anchor near the lower fleet, or under the guns of the fort in five fathoms of water. Sometimes they remain there two or three days, waiting for a favorable opportunity to run out. Perhaps the Trafalgar is there now. I wish to know about it.”

“I infer that you consider me fitted for this duty, Captain Breaker,” said Christy earnestly.

“For that reason only I almost wished you were second or third lieutenant, rather than first,” replied the commander with some earnestness in his manner.

There was no unwritten tradition that the first lieutenant should not be sent on any duty.

