

VICTORIOUS UNION

by Oliver Optic

Chapter 3: A Bivouac Near Fort Morgan

The expedition landed about two miles east of Fort Morgan. The sea was not heavy, as it sometimes is on these sand islands, and the debarkation was effected without any difficulty. At this distance from the defences of the bay not a person was to be seen. The fog banks still swept over the waters of the gulf as during the latter part of the afternoon, and if any number of persons had been near the shore, they could hardly have been seen.

"We are all right so far, Mr. Graines," said Christy, as the bowmen hauled up the boat on the beach.

"It is as quiet as a tomb in this vicinity," replied the engineer, as he led the way to the shore.

"Now, my men, haul the boat out of the water. I think we need not use any of our small force as boat-keepers, for we can hardly spare them for this purpose, Mr. Graines," Christy proceeded very promptly.

"It does not look as though the boat, or anything else, would ever be molested in this lonely locality," replied Graines, as the men lifted it from the water.

"Now carry it back about half a cable from the shore," continued the principal of the party. "If one or two strollers should happen this way, they would not be able to put it into the water, though four men can carry it very easily."

The whale boat was borne to a spot indicated by the lieutenant, and left as it had been taken from the surf. Everything in it was arranged in order, so that it could be hastily put into the water if circumstance demanded a hurried retreat from the scene of operations. Near the spot was a post set up in the sand, which might have been one of the corners of a shanty, or have been used years before by fishermen drying their nets or other gear.

"Do you see that post, my men?" asked Christy, as he pointed to it, not twenty feet from the spot where the boat had been deposited.

"Ay, ay, sir!" the seamen responded, in low tones, for they had been warned not to speak out loud.

"That will be your guide in finding the boat if we should get scattered," added the officer. "Now, do you see the two stars about half way between the horizon and the zenith?"

"Ay, ay, sir!" answered Weeks, the oiler. "The Band of Orion."

"Quite right, Weeks," added Christy. "Fort Morgan lies about west of us; and a course from there in the direction of the two stars will bring you to the coast and the boat. Every man must act for himself to some extent, and you are expected to be prudent, and use your own judgment. It will not be safe for us to keep together, for a dozen men seen all at once would be likely to awaken suspicion."



A Victorious Union
Chapter 3: A Bivouac Near Fort Morgan



“If there is not a crowd of men over by the fort, we can hardly expect to avoid coming together,” suggested Weeks, who proved to be a very intelligent man, with excellent judgment.

“I cannot tell whether or not we shall find any gathering of men in the vicinity of the fort,” replied Christy. “We shall be obliged to govern ourselves according to circumstances. If you find any number of people over there, you can mingle with them. Some of you are very good scholars; but if any of you are disposed to indulge in fine talk, don’t do it. Make your speech correspond with your dress, and let it be rough and rude, for that is the fashion among the laboring class in this region.”

“I suppose sea-slang will not be out of order,” said Weeks.

“Not at all. Simply consider that you are sailors and laborers, and do not forget it,” answered Christy; and he was confident that he had selected only those who were competent to conduct themselves as the occasion might require. “Now, Mr. Graines, tell off five men—any five.”

The engineer called off five of the seamen, whose names he had learned from the list given him by his superior officer.

“Now these five men will each choose his partner, who is to be his companion while we are on shore, and who is to act with him,” continued Christy. “I do not know yet any better than you do what you are to do; but if you are called upon to do any difficult or dangerous work, remember that you are American seamen, and do your best for your country. If you are required to do any fighting, as I do not expect you will, our success depends upon your strong arms and your ready wills. You will do your whole duty, whatever it may be, and do it like true American sailors.”

“Ay, ay, sir!” came in a unanimous voice from the knot of men, though in subdued tones.

“Call the first name again, Mr. Graines,” added Christy.

“Weeks,” replied the engineer.

“Select your man, Weeks.”

“Bingham,” said the oiler.

The names of the other four men who had been selected were called in turn, and each of them selected his partner, each one of course choosing his best friend, if he had not already been appropriated.

“Now, my men, Weeks and Bingham, the first couple, to be called simply ‘One’ when wanted, and they will answer to this designation, will start first. The next couple, to be called ‘Two,’ will follow them; and so on, the other pairs coming in order,” continued Christy, designating each by name and number. “Two will start in ten or fifteen minutes after One, as nearly as you can guess at the time, for it is too dark to see watches if you have them.”

“Are we to choose our own courses?” asked Weeks.

“No; I was coming to that next. Each couple will stroll due north usnearly as he can make it out, till they come to the waters of Mobile Bay. If you see any houses or tents, avoid them, and keep clear of any collection of people before you reach the vicinity of the fort. The bay is the first point you are to reach; then follow the shore to the fort. If you meet any person, talk to him in a friendly way, if necessary, and be as good Confederates as any in this region, even inside of Fort Morgan.”

Weeks and Bingham took up the line of march in the direction indicated, and soon disappeared beyond the rising ground in the middle of the neck of land, which was here about three-eighths of a



A Victorious Union
Chapter 3: A Bivouac Near Fort Morgan



mile wide. A quarter of an hour later Lane and McGrady followed them. While they were waiting, each of the pairs gave a specimen of the dialect they intended to use. McGrady was an Irishman, educated in the public schools of the North, and his language was as good as that of any ordinary American; but now he used a very rich brogue.

Every man followed his own fancy. Lane had lived in the South, and “mought” and “fotch” came readily to his aid. The Crackers of Florida, the backwoodsmen of North Carolina, the swaggering Kentuckian, the wild Texan, were all represented; and Christy could easily have believed he had a company of comedians under his command, instead of a band of loyal Northerners.

The executive officer and the engineer had decided before this time to keep together; and, as soon as they had seen the second couple depart, they set out on their wandering march to the fort in a direction different from that of the others of the party. They walked directly towards the fort, for Christy intended to make his examination of the ground to the eastward of the fortification, on his way to some spot where he could ascertain what vessels were at anchor between the point and the Middle Ground. He discharged this duty very faithfully; and before he reached his objective point he was confident he could draw a map of the region, with what information he had obtained before, which would meet the requirements of Captain Breaker.

“What’s that?” demanded Graines, suddenly placing his hand on the arm of his companion, and stopping short, as they were approaching the crown of the elevation.

A fire was burning on the ground in a depression of the surface, which doubtless concealed its light from persons in the vicinity of the fort, if there were any there. Around it could be seen four men, as the two officers looked over the crest of the hill, who appeared to be engaged in eating and drinking; and they were doing more of the latter than of the former, for the bottle passed very frequently from one to another.

“It looks like a bivouac on the part of those fellows,” said Christy in a low tone.

“But who and what are they?” asked Graines.

“They may be deserters from Fort Morgan, though if they were they would hardly bivouac so near it,” replied Christy, who did not seem to his companion to be at all disturbed by the discovery of the men. “They are more likely to be sailors from some intending blockade-runner at anchor off the point, who have come on shore to make a night of it; and they appear to have made considerable progress in the debauch.”

“They are not soldiers, for you can see by the light of the fire that they are not dressed in uniform,” added the engineer.

“This is the third year of the war, and uniforms for the soldiers are not particularly abundant in the Confederacy.”

“We can’t see the waters of the bay till we reach the top of the knoll yonder, and we don’t know whether there are any vessels at anchor there or not. But we can easily avoid these fellows by keeping behind the ridge till we get where they cannot see us.”

“I don’t know that we want to avoid them, for I should like very much to know who and what they are. They must be tipsy to a greater or less degree by this time, for they do twice as much drinking as eating,” answered Christy, as he advanced a little way farther up the hill. “They have a



A Victorious Union
Chapter 3: A Bivouac Near Fort Morgan



basket of food, and I do not believe they are mere tramps. They are more likely to be engaged in some occupation which brought them to this point, and I think we had better fraternize with them. They may be able to give us some valuable information; and it looks as though they were drunk enough to tell all they know without making any difficulty about it.”

“Do you think it is quite prudent, Mr. Passford, to approach them?” asked the engineer.

“When we come on an excursion of this kind we have to take some risk. If I were alone I should not hesitate to join them, and take my chances, for they must know something about affairs in this vicinity,” replied Christy in a quiet tone, so that his answer might not be interpreted as a boast or a reproach to his companion.

“I am ready to follow you, Mr. Passford, wherever you go, and to depend upon your judgment for guidance,” said Graines very promptly. “If it comes to a fight with those fellows, I beg you to understand that I will do my full share of it, and obey your orders to the letter.”

“Of course I have no doubt whatever in regard to your courage and your readiness to do your whole duty, Mr. Graines,” added Christy, as he led the way to the summit of the elevation. “Now lay aside your grammar and rhetoric, and we must be as good fellows as those bivouackers are making themselves. We are simply sailors who have just escaped from a captured blockade-runner.”

“I don’t see anything around the fire that looks like muskets,” said the engineer, as they descended from the elevation.

“I see nothing at all except the provision-basket and the bottles,” replied Christy.

“But they may be armed for all that.”

“We must take our chances. They are so busy eating and drinking that they have not seen us yet. Perhaps we had better be a little hilarious,” continued the lieutenant, as he began tosing, “We won’t go home till morning,” in which he was joined by his companion as vigorously as the circumstances would permit.

Singing as they went, and with a rolling gait, they approached the revellers.

