

VICTORIOUS UNION

by Oliver Optic

Chapter 10: The Casting Off of the Towline

Christy Passford had been through this channel at least half a dozen times in the *Bellevite*, and knew all the courses and bearings, though the latter did not count in the dense fog which had settled down on the vicinity of the fort. The lights in the binnacle of the *West Wind* had not been put out, though they could not be noticed outside of the schooner. The great fortress could not be seen, and it was as silent as a tomb.

"How does she head, Christy?" asked Graines, as they met at the wheel.

"South a quarter west," replied the lieutenant, "which is the correct course. The fog is very dense just now. I think we have passed the obstructions by this time, though I do not know precisely where they are placed."

"I should call it mighty ticklish navigation just here," added the engineer.

"It is all of that, or will be in five or ten minutes more. Sand Island Lighthouse is not more than a quarter of a mile from the middle of the channel, and at that point the course changes. Perhaps the pilot can make out the lighthouse in the fog. If he don't he will run into five or six feet of water in a few minutes, out of eight fathoms or more."

"I suppose you are prepared to let go the towline if anything goes wrong, Mr. Passford?" added the engineer, perhaps as a suggestion rather than as a question.

"I hope it will not come to that, for the schooner might get aground on the Knoll before we could make sail," replied Christy.

"The steamer has shifted her helm," said Graines, to the great relief of the lieutenant. "The fog is lifting again, and the pilot must have seen the lighthouse. We are headed more to the eastward now."

"The course is south by west, three-quarters west, when the lighthouse bears west by south. We are out of the woods now, and there will be no trouble at all till some blockader stirs up the waters," said Christy.

"I wonder where the *Bellevite* is just now," added Graines, as he looked all about him as the fog lifted a little more, though it was still too thick to make out any vessel, if there were any near.

"If my messenger reached the ship in time, she will be found somewhere near the channel," replied Christy. "Call Lines, if you please, Mr. Graines."

The seaman presently appeared; and the lieutenant directed him to take the wheel, French instructing him how to keep the vessel in line with the steamer.

"I believe you have sailed a schooner, French," said Christy, when he had taken the man to the quarter.

"Yes, sir; I was mate of a coaster for three years, and I should have become master of her if the

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war had not come, and I felt that I ought to go into the navy, though I haven't got ahead much yet, as I expected I should; but I am satisfied to fight for my country where I am."

"That is patriotic; and I hope a higher position will be found for you. But we have not time to talk about that now," continued Christy. "It may be necessary or advisable for Mr. Graines and myself to leave the West Wind at any moment now. In that case I shall place this vessel in your charge, and you will take her off where the Bellevite was moored last night, and come to anchor."

"Thank you, sir; and I will endeavor to do my duty faithfully," replied French, touching his cap.

"Now call the men aft, and I will explain the matter to them."

The lieutenant explained the situation, and directed the other five seamen to respect and obey the man he had selected as captain. Then he directed French to cast off the stops from the foresail and mainsail, and have the jib and flying-jib ready to set at a moment's notice.

"I don't think Captain Sullendine can get out of his stateroom, where he has been confined, or Bokes out of the deck-house; but if either of them should do so, you must secure them as you think best," continued Christy. "Do you fully understand your orders, French?"

"Perfectly, Mr. Passford; and I will do my duty as well as I know how," answered the able seaman, who, like many others in the service, deserved a better position.

The new officer and crew went to work on the sails, and in a few minutes they were ready to be set. Another bank of fog was rolling up, in which the two vessels would soon be involved. But the Tallahatchie was in a position where it was plain sailing now, and her future troubles would all come from the blockaders.

"There you are!" exclaimed the engineer, as the peal of a gun boomed over the water from the westward. "The steamer has been seen by a blockader, and she will catch it now."

"I don't believe that was one of the Bellevite's guns," added Christy. "Captain Breaker would not take a position over to the westward, for that would give him the outside track, and he always goes at anything by the shortest way."

"We have the fog again for the next ten or fifteen minutes. The blockader that fired that shot must have got a sight at the steamer, and she is still pegging away at her. We may get knocked over by our own guns," continued Graines.

"There is no danger at present. She can't hit anything in this fog except by a chance shot."

"And one of them sometimes does the most mischief. The fog is heavier just now than it has been at any time during the night. I can't see the Tallahatchie just now."

"It is blacker than a stack of blackbirds," added Christy. "I am confident that we are at least a mile south of the lighthouse, and we will take advantage of the gloom to hoist the mainsail, and then the foresail if it holds as it is now;" and he gave the order to French, who was assisted by the engineer in the work.

The lieutenant took the wheel, and sent Lines to assist the others. The blockader to the westward continued to discharge her guns; but her people could see nothing, and her solid shot began to fall astern of the West Wind, and the Tallahatchie took no notice of her or her guns. Christy saw that the fog was lifting again, and this would reveal to the steamer ahead what he had been doing. Besides, he had gone in tow as long as he intended. Graines reported the two sails as set.



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“Stand by to hoist the jib!” he shouted, deeming it no longer necessary to conceal his movements.

“What are you doing there?” demanded the officer, who seemed to be in charge of the after part of the steamer; and his tones, with the flood of profanity he poured out, indicated that he was in a violent fit of anger.

“I reckon we won’t tow any farther,” replied Christy, who was still at the wheel, and the officer yelled loud enough for him to hear at the helm; but French repeated his answer.

“All ready to hoist the jib,” Graines reported.

“Cast off the towline!” shouted Christy at the top of his lungs. “Hoist the jib!”

“Towline all clear!” called the engineer a moment later, and the jib went up in a hurry.

The jib filled on the starboard tack, and the West Wind went off to the south-east as Christy put up the helm. The fog lifted just enough to enable the officer at the stern of the steamer to see the West Wind as she went off on her new course. No one on the former could have suspected that the latter had changed hands; for French had answered for Captain Sullendine every time a call was made, and his voice was not unlike that of the master of the schooner.

Christy could not understand why the officer who used so many expletives should be dissatisfied, for the Tallahatchie could certainly make better time when no longer encumbered by the towing of the West Wind. But it must look to him just as though the schooner would be captured by the steamer to the westward, which had been uselessly firing at the blockade-runners in the densest of the fog. He could not help seeing that the vessel in tow had set her sails, and therefore the casting off of the wire rope could not have been caused by an accident.

The action of the captain of the schooner, for they had no reason to suppose the change on board of the schooner was not made by him, must have bewildered the officers of the Tallahatchie. But the fog was lifting, the steamer to windward was now under way, though moving very slowly, and her solid shot fell very near to the Confederate vessel.

By this time the sails of the West Wind were all drawing full, and the craft was making very good headway through the water. The fog bank had scattered, and appeared now to be in a dozen smaller masses, floating off in the direction of Mobile Point. Christy still retained the wheel, while Graines was putting everything in order forward and in the waist, after setting the sails.

“Send French aft to take the wheel, Mr. Graines,” called Christy, as the engineer came aft to see the main sheet.

This man, who was the captain of the forecabin, one of the most important and best-paid of the petty officers, hastened aft to relieve the chief of the expedition, who went to work with his own hands when the exigency of the service required.

“Make the course south-west, French,” said Christy, as he abandoned the wheel to the petty officer.

“South-west, sir,” repeated the seaman.

“Can you make out the Bellevite, Mr. Graines?” asked he, as he met the engineer on the quarterdeck.

“I have kept a sharp lookout for her, Mr. Passford, but I have not seen her yet,” replied Graines,



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as he looked earnestly in the direction in which the schooner was headed.

“If Captain Breaker received my message sent by Weeks, the ship must have taken a position somewhere below the entrance to the channel, and that is about four miles south of the fort, and out of the reach of any of its guns,” added the lieutenant.

“There are half a dozen of those fog banks floating about near the water in that direction, and she may be there,” replied Graines, as he took a spy-glass from the brackets in the companion. “Very likely she is down that way somewhere, and the Tallahatchie may run right into her.”

“I don’t think Captain Breaker would place his ship where anything of this kind would be likely to happen,” replied Christy. “It is still as dark as Egypt ahead, and I think we shall see the *Bellevite* very soon.”

The Confederate steamer had sensibly increased her speed, and gave no attention whatever to the schooner or the blockader to the westward of her. Captain Rombold seemed to be possessed of a supreme confidence in the speed of his steamer, and a complete assurance that he should escape unscathed from all pursuers, if any attempted to follow him. He was not aware that the *Bellevite* had recently had her bottom cleaned, and her engine put in thoroughly good condition, so that she could make as many knots in an hour as ever before; and that was saying more than could be said of any other craft in the navy.

“I would give my month’s pay to know what the Tallahatchie has for a midship gun,” said Christy, still gazing at the Confederate vessel as she continued to increase her speed.

Suddenly, without saying anything, Graines, who had been at his side, left him, and hastened to the companion, where he stooped down and gazed into the cabin. Christy had heard nothing to attract his attention, but he concluded that Captain Sullendine had escaped from his prison, and he called the two men who had been stationed in the waist to the quarter-deck to render such assistance as the engineer might need; but this officer remained at the entrance to the cabin, and made no further movement.

