

VICTORIOUS UNION

by Oliver Optic

Chapter 11: A Happy Return to the Bellevite

Although he anticipated a disagreeable scene with the captain of the West Wind, who, he supposed, had slept off the fumes of the inordinate quantity of liquor he had drunk, he did not consider that there was any peril in the situation, for he had plenty of force to handle him easily. His curiosity was excited, and he walked over to the companion, where Graines appeared to be gazing into the darkness of the cabin; but he did not interfere with the proceedings of his fellow-officer.

“We don’t need the men you have called from the waist,” said the engineer in a low tone.

Christy sent the two men back to their former station. As he was returning to his chosen position abaft the companion, he saw a glimmer of light in the gloom of the cabin. Graines invited him to take a place at his side, chuckling perceptibly as he made room for him. The lieutenant stooped down so that he could see into the cabin, and discovered a man with a lighted match in his hand, fumbling at the door of the closet where Captain Sullendine kept his whiskey.

“Is that the captain?” whispered Christy, who could not make out the man, though he was not as tall as the master of the West Wind.

“No; it is Bokes,” replied Graines. “He must have got out of the deck-house through one of the windows. He found the bottle French gave him was empty, and I have no doubt his nerves are in a very shaky condition.”

Both of the officers had leaned back, so that their whispers did not disturb the operator in the cabin. His first match had gone out, and he lighted another. Captain Sullendine had been too much overcome by his potations to take his usual precautions for the safety of his spirit-room, and the observers saw that the key was in the door. Bokes took one of the bottles, and carried it to the table. His match went out, and he poked about for some time in the cabin.

Presently he was seen again, coming out of the pantry with a lighted lantern in his hand, which he placed on the table. He had a corkscrew in the other hand, with which he proceeded, as hurriedly as his trembling hands would permit, to open the bottle, for the master had drained the last one. Then he poured out a tumblerful of whiskey, as the observers judged it was from its color, and drank it off. At this point Graines descended to the cabin and confronted the fellow.

Christy, after taking a long look to the south-east, followed the engineer into the cabin, for it was possible that his companion intended to look into the condition of Captain Sullendine, and he desired to be present at the interview.

“Good-morning, Bokes,” said Graines, as he placed himself in front of the seaman.

“Mornin’, Mr. Balker,” replied Bokes; and the heavy drink he had just taken appeared to have done nothing more than steady his nerves, for he seemed to have the full use of his faculties.

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“How do you feel this morning, my friend?” continued the engineer; and Christy thought he was making himself very familiar with the boozing seaman, who was at least fifty years old.

“Fine’s a fiddle-string,” replied Bokes. “We done got out all right, I reckon;” and it was plain that he had not taken notice that the schooner was no longer in tow of the steamer.

“All right,” replied Graines, as he placed himself on a stool, and pushed another towards the sailor, who seated himself. “By the way, friend Bokes, I suppose you have been on board of the Tallahatchie?”

“More’n a dozen times, here ’n’ up in Mobile. My fust cousin’s an ’iler aboard on her,” replied Bokes.

“How many guns does she carry?” asked the engineer in a very quiet tone, though the man did not seem to be at all suspicious that he was in the act of being used for a purpose.

“I don’t jest know how many guns she kerries; but she’s got a big A’mstrong barker ’midships that’ll knock any Yankee ship inter the middle o’ next year ’n less time ’n it’ll take you to swaller a tot o’ Kaintuck whiskey. It’s good for five-mile shots.”

“This is her midship gun, you say?”

“Midship gun, sir; ’n I heard ’em say it flung a shot nigh on to a hundred pounds,” added Bokes.

Both Christy and Graines asked the man other questions; but he had not made good use of his opportunities, and knew very little about the armament of the Tallahatchie; yet he remembered what he had heard others say about her principal gun. The lieutenant knew all about the Armstrong piece, for he had in his stateroom the volume on “Ordinance and Gunnery,” by Simpson, and he had diligently studied it.

“Mr. Passford,” said one of the hands at the head of the companion ladder.

“On deck,” replied Christy.

“Steamer on the port bow,” added the seaman.

“That must be the Bellevite,” said the lieutenant.

“Now you may go on deck, Bokes,” added Graines, as he drove the boozier ahead of him, and followed his superior.

He instructed the men in the waist to keep an eye on Bokes, and sent him forward. Then he took the precaution to lock the doors at the companion-way, and joined Christy on the quarterdeck.

“That’s the Bellevite without a doubt,” said Christy, as he directed the spy-glass he had taken from the brackets, and was still looking through it. “But she is farther to the eastward than I expected to find her.”

“I suppose her commander knows what he is about,” replied Graines.

“Certainly he does; and I do not criticise his action.”

All the steamers on the blockade except the Bellevite and the one in the west had been sent away on other duty, for it was believed that the former would be enough to overhaul anything that was likely to come out of Mobile Bay at this stage of the war. Sure of the steamer of which he was the executive officer, Christy directed his glass towards the one on the other side of the channel. She had received no notice of the approach of a powerful blockade-runner, and she had not a full head of steam when she discovered the Tallahatchie. Besides, she was one of the slowest vessels in the



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service.

The black smoke was pouring out of her smokestack as though she was using something besides anthracite coal in her furnaces, and she was doing her best to intercept the Confederate. She was still firing her heaviest gun, though it could be seen that her shots fell far short of the swift steamer.

“They have seen the Bellevite on board of the Tallahatchie, and she has changed her course,” said Graines, while Christy was still watching the movements of the blockader in the west. “Probably Captain Rombold knows all about the Bellevite, and he is not anxious to get too near her.”

“She has pointed her head to the south-west, and the Bellevite is changing her course. I hope we shall not miss her,” added Christy.

When the fog bank blew over and revealed her presence on board of the West Wind, the Bellevite was not more than half a mile to the southward, but she was at least two miles to the eastward of her.

“Can we get any more sail on this craft, Mr. Graines?” asked the lieutenant.

“We can set her two gaff-topsails.”

“Do so as speedily as possible.”

Christy went to the wheel, and Graines, with three men at each sail, assisting himself, soon had shaken out and set the gaff-topsails. The effect was immediately apparent in the improved sailing of the schooner. A Confederate flag was found in the signal chest, and it was set at the main topmast head, with the American ensign over it, so that it could be easily seen on board of the Bellevite. The lieutenant was now very confident that he should intercept his ship.

“Now clear away that quarter-boat, so that we can drop it into the water without any delay,” continued Christy, as he gave up the wheel to Lines again.

Graines hastened to obey the order, for the Bellevite was rushing through the water at her best speed, and it was evident enough by this time that Weeks had faithfully performed the duty assigned to him.

“A small pull on the fore-sheet, Londall,” called Christy to one of the men on the forecastle.

“Another on the main sheet,” he added to Fallon in the waist.

The bow of the West Wind was thus pointed closer into the wind; and the gaff-topsails enabled her to hold her speed after this change. Paul Vapoor, the chief engineer of the Bellevite, was plainly doing his best in the engine-room, and if the lieutenant had been a sporting man, he would have been willing to wager that his ship would overhaul the Tallahatchie; for on an emergency she had actually steamed twenty-two knots an hour, and Christy believed she could do it now, being in first-rate condition, if the occasion required.

“What time is it now, Mr. Graines?” asked Christy.

“Quarter-past four,” replied the engineer, when he had lighted a match and looked at his watch.

“I thought it was later than that, and I have been looking for some signs of daylight,” replied the lieutenant.

“It is just breaking a little in the east.”

“I suppose Captain Sullendine is still asleep.”

“No doubt of it; he has not had two hours yet in his berth, and he is good for two hours more at least.”



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“I think we shall be on board of the *Bellevite* in ten minutes more,” continued Christy, as he noted the position of the ship. “Have you instructed French what to do with Captain Sullendine if he should attempt to make trouble?”

“I told him to keep him in his stateroom, and I feel pretty sure he can’t get out. If Bokes, who must have an idea of what is going on by this time, is troublesome, I told French to tie his hands behind him, and make him fast to the fore-rigging.”

“The fog is settling down again on the *Tallahatchie*; but Captain Breaker knows where she is, and he will not let up till he has got his paw on her,” said Graines. “The blockader in the west isn’t anywhere now. She could not do a thing with such a steamer as that *Confederate*.”

The *West Wind* was now directly in the path of the *Bellevite*, and in five minutes more she stopped her screw. Possibly her commander was bewildered at the sight of the schooner, whose flag indicated that she was already a prize, though he could hardly understand to what vessel; for nothing was known on board of her in regard to the cotton vessel the *Tallahatchie* was to tow to sea.

“Stand by to lower the boat on the quarter!” shouted Christy, perhaps a little excited at the prospect of soon being on the deck of his own ship, as he and Graines took their places in the craft.

The four men at the falls lowered the boat into the water in the twinkling of an eye, and the two officers dropped the oars into the water as soon as it was afloat. They pulled like men before the mast, and went astern of the schooner, whose head had been thrown up into the wind to enable the officers to embark in safety. French was now in command of the schooner, and he filled away as soon as the boat pulled off from her side.

The *Bellevite* had stopped her screw a little distance from the *West Wind*, and, as the boat approached her, she backed her propeller. Her gangway had been lowered, and the two officers leaped upon the landing. They had hardly done so before the great gong in the engine-room was heard, and the steamer went ahead again. The boat was allowed to go adrift; but Christy shouted to French to pick it up. The lieutenant’s heart beat a lively tattoo as he mounted the steps, and ascended to the deck.

