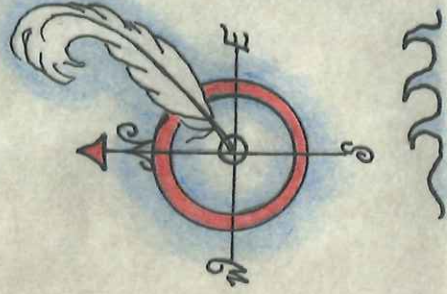


The Adventures of Charlie Pierce

The Last Egret



By Harvey E. Oyer III



Chapter Six

On Our Own

We started to plan our secret expedition right away, which meant provisioning ourselves for a long hunting trip. I packed as much food and supplies as I could into waterproof containers and hid the containers all over the island. The Bradley brothers were doing the same thing at their house.

We figured we'd be gone for at least a few weeks, so we packed plenty of dry food, including cornmeal for grits, flour and baking powder

for biscuits, dried pork, cans of beans, jars of pickled vegetables, and I even managed to find a few jars of Mama's huckleberry jam.

Remembering what John Samuelson said about running out of bullets, we'd also need a lot of ammunition. I figured this would be the hardest part because both my Papa and the Bradleys' Pa kept their ammunition in locked cabinets. They would know right away if any went missing.

But then we fell onto a good piece of luck: Papa said he and Mr. Bradley had some work to do and would me and Guy and Louis be willing to run up to the Brelsford's store and buy some supplies?

I readily agreed, so Guy, Louis, and I sailed up Lake Worth to the Brelsford's general store. The store was run by two brothers, E. M. and Doc Brelsford. They had a post office at the store, and they knew us pretty well from our trips up to collect the mail and Mama's magazines. They called their post office "Palm Beach." Later on, the whole area would use that same name. It turned out that the Brelsford's knew how to pick a nice piece of property. Some years later, their small store would be torn down by a rich oil tycoon named Henry Flagler, who built a grand home called Whitehall on the site.

The Brelsford's general store wasn't very big, and they knew most every family in the area, which meant they knew what we usually needed. When I handed over our order, Doc Brelsford whistled under his breath and said, "Shoot, you boys planning on taking on an army with all this ammunition?"

I tried to laugh so he wouldn't get suspicious. "No, sir. Just a hunting trip."

"I'll say." Doc filled our order for birdshot, plus larger slugs for game like bears and hogs, in addition to Papa's order for kerosene, vinegar, cocoa, onions, and fish hooks.

On the way back, I tried not to feel too guilty about charging so much ammunition

to our account. But then I thought about how much money we'd make, and I promised I'd pay Papa back for everything, plus give him all the extra money we were going to make from the plumes.

The last thing we needed was a boat, but I knew just where we could find the perfect boat. Before my Uncle Will had moved up to Sand Point, he'd used some of his Spanish gold to buy a twenty-eight-foot sailboat with a seven-foot beam and a little covered cabin. He used it to run supplies and people up and down the east coast of Florida, from Jacksonville to Key West. He'd named it the *Magellan*, after the great Portuguese navigator of the early 1500s who was the first person to sail around the world.

When Uncle Will wasn't using the *Magellan*, he kept it tied up near his old cabin on the north end of Hypoluxo Island—which is where it was right then.

I knew taking Uncle Will's boat could land me in serious trouble, even worse than the ammunition. But again, I promised myself that, just as with Papa, I'd pay for it myself if anything happened to the *Magellan*. The way I figured it, we'd have enough money to buy Uncle Will a whole new boat.

Still, as the night before the Great Plume Bird Expedition ticked away, I lay in bed awake and nervous. I'd never hidden such a big thing from Mama and Papa. Part of me knew that I'd been stealing food and supplies, and Mama

would say that I'd stolen money buying all that ammunition. I could hear her voice in my head: "That's not how we raised you, Charlie. That's not the Pierce way."

But then I reminded myself why I was doing all this. It wasn't for me. I figured it would be different if I was sneaking away so I could do something selfish. But I wasn't. I was only doing something that needed to be done for the whole family, and wasn't that what Papa said it meant to be a man? To take care of your family?

Still, it didn't make sleep come any easier, so I sat up and wrote a short note to Mama and Papa explaining where I'd gone and why.

Finally, sometime before dawn, I slipped from my bed and tiptoed through the house as quiet as a shadow. When I passed Lillie's door, I stopped and almost checked on her. But then I decided the sound of the door might wake her up, so I went outside into the still night.

The last thing I did before I left was set a letter to Mama and Papa on the kitchen table:

*Dear Mama & Papa,
I know you'll be surprised when you find
my bed empty and this letter on the table.
Don't worry. I didn't get ~~carried~~ carried off by
bears. Papa, I know you said you didn't want
to plume hunt because it wasn't any way to
make a living. But I'm not trying to make a*

living. I just want to make enough money to save our island. Please don't worry about me. I know what I'm doing.

With Love,

Charlie

P.S.: Guy and Louis Bradley came along, too, and we took Uncle Will's boat. I figured no one was using it for the time being.

Outside, I walked up the trail toward Uncle Will's cabin. The island was still under the blanket of night, and the moon peeked through the pine trees and glittered off the water. The air smelled fresh and clean, and the ground was soft underfoot as I followed the path toward the water. I felt more than ever that I didn't want to leave our island. I loved this island.

When I reached the *Magellan*, the boat was riding low in the water because I'd already loaded all the supplies on board. I waded through the warm, shallow water, clambered aboard, cast off the lines, and set out alone. The dark water shushed alongside the boat, the shore was quiet, and I felt like the only person on the planet.

A great blue heron suddenly swooped by, its huge wings causing ripples over the dark water. I almost jumped right out of my skin, but then I laughed at myself a little. Spooked by a bird!

Just as I planned, it was still dark when I finally came within sight of the Bradleys' dock. I sailed on past and dropped anchor silently a little ways up the shore to wait for my friends. The eastern horizon was just beginning to

lighten. Dawn was coming. I hoped Guy and Louis would hurry up and tried not to get nervous. I was sure that like everyone in these parts, their parents would be up with the first light of dawn.

I heard someone sneeze before I saw anybody, and my heart started pounding. I watched the shore anxiously, hoping we wouldn't be discovered before the expedition even started.

But it was only Guy and Louis, walking down the path toward the shore. I noticed that Louis had lashed his favorite fishing pole to his pack and smiled. Louis stifled another sneeze in his shirt as they waded out to the boat and climbed in. Pretty soon, Guy started coughing too.

"You better quiet down," I said, helping Guy aboard. "You're gonna wake up your whole house."

"Can't heb it," Guy said, sniffing.

"Me neeber," Louis added.

It turned out they'd both fallen ill two days before. It was rotten luck, but there was nothing we could do about it. It was now or never. So I hoisted the sail, and we headed north to the inlet to pick up Tiger.

We were treated to a beautiful sunrise, but the sailing was hard and took much longer than I expected. An easterly breeze was coming from the ocean, and we had to zigzag across the lake to make any progress.



It didn't help much that Guy and Louis were both so sick they couldn't do much besides sit and watch me handle the lines and tiller. Once I even caught Louis curled up on the floor of the boat, sleeping.

When we finally reached the inlet, we sailed close to the shore and kept our eyes peeled for Tiger. He was supposed to meet us, and I was anxious and ready to get on the ocean.

Finally, I saw my friend paddling out to us in his dugout canoe. He climbed aboard, and we lifted his canoe onto the *Magellan's* deck and lashed it down.

We were finally ready, and everybody was excited to get the Great Plume Bird Expedition officially started. Even Louis seemed to perk up a little bit as I pointed the bow of the *Magellan* for the narrow inlet and we headed for the Atlantic Ocean.