

VICTORIOUS UNION

by Oliver Optic

Chapter 34: A Victorious Union

The fog was coming and going in the distance, and at times the land could be just discerned. In spite of the number and vigilance of the blockading fleet, several hundred blockade-runners had succeeded in making their way into Cape Fear River, though several hundred also had been captured, not to mention a very considerable number that had been run ashore or burned when escape became hopeless.

It was the policy of the Confederacy to send out vessels to prey upon the commerce of the United States. Some of them began their depredations without making a port in the South, and a few of the swift steamers that succeeded in getting into Mobile, Wilmington, and other safe places, were fitted out for the work of destruction. The fog that prevailed inshore was favorable to blockade-runners; and if there was a vessel of this character in Cape Fear River, the early morning had been such as to tempt her to try to make her way through the blockaders to sea.

“She is not one of the ordinary steamers that run in and out of the river,” said Mr. Baskirk, while he and the commander were still watching the progress of the chase, and Paul Vapoor was warming up the engine as he had done before.

“She is larger than the *St. Regis*, but hardly equal in size to the *Bellevite*,” added Christy. “She cannot draw more than twelve or fourteen feet of water, or she could not have come out through those shallow channels at the mouth of Cape Fear River. She seems to have the speed to run away from her pursuers; but probably not one of them can make fifteen knots an hour.”

The three pursuers of the blockade-runner had changed their course when the chase did so; but it was already evident that they had no chance to overhaul her. They were still three miles astern of her, while the *St. Regis*, at sunset, was not more than three. Not a shot had been fired by any one of the steamers, and it would have been a waste of ammunition to do so.

“We are gaining on her,” said Christy, half an hour later. “That steamer is making sixteen knots at least.”

“If she has found out that we can outsail her, very likely she will count upon the darkness to enable her to give us the slip,” suggested Mr. Baskirk.

“Mr. Vapoor has come to his bearings, and in another half hour we shall be within one mile of her. But I am afraid we shall not be able to settle this affair finally to-night,” replied Christy.

The darkness gathered around the two ships, and none of the steamers in the distance could any longer be seen. The officers could just make out the steamer ahead, which still kept on her course. The midship gun was now brought into use, and a round shot was sent on its mission to her; but with little chance of hitting her in the increasing gloom, for the sky was obscured with clouds, and all the signs

A Victorious Union
Chapter 31: A Victorious Union



indicated fog during the night, which would be exceedingly favorable to the chase. A flash was seen in the distance, and then came the roar of a heavy gun.

“She is not merely a blockade-runner; for it appears now that she is an armed vessel, and has some heavy metal on board,” said Christy.

“But no shot has come within hearing,” added Mr. Baskirk. “Perhaps she only wished to inform us that she could bite as well as bark.”

The *St. Regis* kept on her course for another hour. Christy was very anxious, for the chase was plainly a Confederate man-of-war, or a privateer; and if she escaped she might begin her work of destruction the very next day. At two bells in the first watch she could not be seen; but the commander kept on his course another half-hour, and then he ran into a fog.

The log indicated that the ship was making her best speed; and if the chase continued on her former course, she must have been within sight or hearing by this time. Christy peered through the gloom of the night and the fog, and listened for any sound. He kept up a tremendous thinking all the time, and acted as though he was in doubt.

“Make the course east, Mr. Baskirk,” said he, calling the executive officer.

“East, Captain Passford?” interrogated the lieutenant; and if he tried to conceal the astonishment he felt, his tones failed him.

“East, Mr. Baskirk,” repeated the commander.

The course was given to the quartermaster at the wheel; and the *St. Regis* came about gradually, and stood off in the direction indicated. Christy had a theory of his own, in regard to the probable movements of the chase, and he desired to be solely responsible for the result: therefore he kept his plan to himself.

“Call all hands, Mr. Baskirk, but without any noise at all,” continued the commander, while the ship was still driving ahead at the rate of twenty knots an hour.

The ship’s company silently took their stations, and no one on the deck spoke a loud word, though no order to this effect had been given. All the white cotton cloth that could be found on board was brought to the waist, where it was torn into strips about three inches wide, and two feet in length. These two pieces were distributed among the ship’s company, with the order to tie them around the left arm, above the elbow.

The fog was deep and dense; and the lookouts, who were stationed on the top-gallant forecastle and aloft, could not see a ship’s length ahead. Christy had gone forward, and made his way out on the bowsprit, in order to get as far as possible from the noise of the engine. He listened there for a full half-hour, and while the ship had made ten miles.

“Starboard a little, Mr. Baskirk,” he called to the executive officer, who had followed him forward.

“Starboard, sir,” repeated the officer, as he sent the order aft.

“Port! Port!” exclaimed the commander with more energy.

The orders were passed rapidly through the line of officers till they reached the quartermaster conning the wheel. The captain continued to listen for another quarter of an hour.

“Steady!” he shouted aloud, and left his position on the bowsprit to take another on the top-



A Victorious Union
Chapter 31: A Victorious Union



gallant fore-castle. "We are close aboard of her, Mr. Baskirk! Have your grappling irons ready! Lay her aboard as we come alongside!"

By this time all hands forward could see the dark hull of the enemy. The *St. Regis* was rapidly running alongside of her, for the chase did not seem to be going at her former speed; and no doubt her commander was busy working out some manœuvre he had devised to escape from his pursuers. The boarders threw their grappling-irons, and fastened to the side of the enemy.

The drum was heard on board of her, beating to quarters; but it was too late, for the boarders were springing over her rail. Christy heard one bell on the gong of the other ship, and instantly made the same signal on his own. It was evidently a surprise to the enemy, but the ship's company were promptly rallied. The enemy was overwhelmed in a few minutes, though not till several had fallen on both sides. The captain seemed to have been too busy with his manœuvre to escape to attend to present conditions.

While the commander of the *St. Regis* remained on the deck, or even on the top-gallant fore-castle, the clang of his own engine prevented him from hearing any other sounds; and the enemy appeared not to have seen the ship till she emerged from the fog. The crew of the prize, as she was by this time, were all driven below, and the victory was complete.

"Do you surrender?" demanded Mr. Baskirk of the officer who appeared to be the captain.

"There appears to be no alternative," replied the commander very gloomily: and he did not attempt to explain how his misfortune had come upon him. He had counted upon the fog to insure his salvation; but it appeared to have been the primary cause of his capture, though he certainly had not been as vigilant as a commander should be. Christy came on board, and Mr. Baskirk introduced him.

"I am glad to see you, Captain Passford," said the commander as a matter of form. "I was absolutely sure that you would chase me to the westward, sir; and I had not the slightest expectation of encountering you on this course."

"I took my chances of finding you in this direction rather than in the opposite one," replied Christy. "It appears that I correctly interpreted your strategy, though I dared not even mention my plan to my executive officer."

"I have fallen into my own trap, and being captured as I was, is disgraceful to me," added Captain Winnlock, as his name proved to be; and the steamer was the *Watauga*.

Christy's opinion of the capture did not differ from that of the commander of the prize, but he made no remark upon it. The *Watauga* was loaded with cotton, which was to be sent to England from Nassau, while the steamer was to go on a cruise in search of defenceless merchantmen of the United States.

"I have a passenger on board, Captain Passford, who bears the same name that you do, and possibly he may be one of your relatives, though he is by no means a Federalist," said Captain Winnlock.

"Indeed! May I ask his name?" replied Christy very much surprised.

"Colonel Homer Passford, sir."

"My uncle again!"

Mr. French, the master, had already been appointed prize-master; and while Mr. Baskirk was



A Victorious Union
Chapter 31: A Victorious Union



making the arrangements for her departure for New York, Christy accompanied the captain to the cabin. Colonel Passford had learned the fate of the Watauga; and he sat at a table, his face covered with both hands.

“I have brought down to see you, Colonel Passford, your nephew,” said the commander; and his uncle sprang to his feet, and gazed at his brother’s son as though he had been a spectre.

“Christy!” he exclaimed; but he could say no more, and groaned in his anguish.

“He is a lieutenant-commander now, and captain of the steamer *St. Regis*, formerly the *Tallahatchie*. The *Watauga* is now unfortunately the prize of his ship,” added Captain Winnlock, as he retired from the cabin.

“Captured again by my nephew,” groaned the unhappy colonel. “I believe you are the emissary of the Evil One, sent to torment me.”

“I am sent by the opposite Power, Uncle Homer,” replied Christy very gently. “But I am more astonished to see you here than you ought to be to see me, for I go wherever the fortunes of war carry me.”

“I was still trying to serve my country in her misfortunes. I raised another cargo of cotton among my friends, and it is now on board of this vessel. It has fallen into your hands, where most of my cotton has gone.”

The victorious commander inquired for his aunt and cousins in the South, and informed him that his mother and sister were very well. He added that he should be obliged to send him to New York in the prize, and insured him a brotherly welcome at Bonnydale. He parted with his uncle pitying him very much; but he had chosen for himself which side he would take in the great conflict.

The *Watauga* had a crew of sixty men, who were to be re-enforced at Nassau, and a large prize-crew had to be sent with her; but French returned with his force in three weeks, and the *St. Regis* was again fully manned. Christy received a letter from the flag-officer, who commended him very highly for the service he had rendered; and the *St. Regis* was continued on her present station through the remainder of the summer, and during the winter on the outer limit of the blockaders.

She made several captures, though all of them without any fighting, for no more Confederate men-of-war, actually or intended as such, came out of Wilmington, or attempted to enter the Cape Fear; but he sent a large number of blockade-runners, loaded with cotton coming out, or with supplies for the Confederate armies going in, to New York.

One day in August a large steamer was reported to the commander of the *St. Regis* as coming from the South. Christy was all ready for a battle if she proved to be a Confederate cruiser; but to his great joy she turned out to be the *Bellevite*. The ocean was as smooth as glass, and she came alongside the *St. Regis*. The young commander hastened on board of her, followed by his chief engineer.

Captain Breaker actually hugged him amid the repeated cheers and applause of the ship’s company, and Paul Vapoor was received with hardly less enthusiasm. Christy had to shake hands for the next half-hour.

“But how do you and the *Bellevite* happen to be in this latitude, Captain Breaker?” asked the young commander when he had an opportunity to speak.

“Haven’t you heard the news, Captain Passford?” demanded the captain of the *Bellevite*.



A Victorious Union
Chapter 31: A Victorious Union



“What news? We don’t get the news so far off shore,” replied Christy.

“There was no farther use for my ship in the Gulf, and I am sent here to report to the flag-officer. Admiral Farragut turned his attention to Mobile Bay with his fleet; and I gave him the information you procured for me. The *Bellevite* took part in the battle, and it was the hottest action in which I was ever engaged. My ship was badly cut up in her upper works, but she came out all right.”

“This is glorious news, Captain Breaker!” exclaimed Christy, waving his hat, whereupon the tars in the waist broke out in a volley of cheers.

“The carpenters have been busy since the action, and the *Bellevite* is as good as new,” added her commander, as he proceeded to tell the story of the great battle, to which Christy and Paul listened with breathless interest. “Fort Morgan and Fort Gaines surrendered, and the bay is open to our ships.”

The narrative has gone into history, and it is not necessary to repeat it. The *Bellevite* reported to the flag officer; and as her great speed fitted her for duty like that in which the *St. Regis* was engaged, she was employed as a cruiser till the end of the war, though she and Christy’s ship took part in the bombardment and capture of Fort Fisher in January. The end was rapidly approaching. The *Bellevite* continued to cruise until the end of the war, announced to the world by the surrender of General Lee.

Among the steamers ordered up the James River were the *Bellevite* and the *St. Regis*, and the sailors of both were among those who put out the fire which threatened to consume the city of Richmond. Christy saw the President there, and was presented to him, which he will remember as long as he lives. In due time the *St. Regis* was ordered to the navy yard at New York. As early as possible he hastened to Bonnydale, where all the family and Bertha Pembroke were waiting for him. It was a sort of united embrace which welcomed him; and all the day and half the night were given to the narrative of the young commander’s adventures. They were all supremely happy.

Peace had come, and the whole North was ringing with the rejoicings of the people. Thousands upon thousands had laid down their lives in the army and the navy in their devotion to their country, and were laid in graves far from home and kindred, or committed to the silent depths of the ocean.

They had won Peace and A Victorious Union.

It was far otherwise in the South, though Peace spread her mantle over the whole united nation. Her people had fought valiantly, and made sacrifices which no one beyond their borders can understand or appreciate. If the devotion and self-sacrifice of the South, the bravery and determination with which her sons fought, and the heroism with which they suffered and died, were the only considerations, they deserved success. But thirty years of peace have made the South more prosperous than ever before, and her people enjoy the benefits of the Victorious Union.

Homer Passford, like thousands of others in the South, was a ruined man at the close of the war. He had lost his plantation, and he and his family had nowhere to lay their heads. But he was a true Southerner, and he did not regret or repent of what he had done for what he called his country. His brother chartered a steamer to bring the family to Bonnydale, but only for a friendly visit. The reunion was a happy one; and neither brother was disposed to talk politics, and those of the North did not indulge in a single “I told you so!” in the presence of their defeated relatives. They were the same as they had been before the war; and it is needless to say that Horatio generously helped out Homer financially; and now he is as wealthy and prosperous as ever before.



A Victorious Union
Chapter 31: A Victorious Union



When it came to disposing of the vessels that were no longer needed for the navy, Christy bought the *St. Regis*, for in a moderate way compared with his father he was a rich man. On the day he was twenty-one years old, Bertha Pembroke became his wife; and Paul Vapoor became the husband of Florry Passford on the same occasion. Over a year had elapsed since the war, and the *St. Regis* had been entirely reconstructed in her interior, and furnished in the most elegant manner.

Her first mission was a voyage to Mobile to bring the family of Uncle Homer to the wedding. It was the grandest occasion that had ever been known in the region of Bonnydale. The young couple were to spend the summer on their bridal trip on board of the elegant steam-yacht, visiting various ports of Europe.

In the multitude who came to Bonnydale to assist at the marriage of the young hero was Monsieur Gilfleur, who was received with distinguished consideration by all the family, including the bride elect; and it can be safely asserted that he was one of the happiest of the guests who rejoiced in the felicity of the ex-lieutenant-commander, for he had resigned his commission at the close of the war. This was not the first time they had met since their memorable campaigns in Bermuda and Nassau; for the detective had spent a fortnight at Bonnydale with his young friend, during which they had told the stories of their experience in secret service. They are fast friends for life.

Captain Passford, senior, presented to his son an elegant house, built and magnificently furnished while Christy and his wife were voyaging in European waters. It is on the Bonnydale estate: and the grandfather of two boys and a girl does not have to go far to visit the family, for he is nearly eighty years old. Christy is somewhat grizzled with iron gray hair and whiskers; but he is still the same as when he was a young officer, and still as devoted as ever to the country he helped to make *A Victorious Union*.

