

# VICTORIOUS UNION

*by Oliver Optic*

## *Chapter 27: Captain Passford Alone in His Glory*

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Christy Passford was stirring at an early hour the next morning, and so was Bertha Pembroke; for the *St. Regis* was to sail that day, though the tide did not serve till four in the afternoon. After breakfast his father called him into the library, and closed the door. Captain Passford had remained in the city the evening before till the last train, and it was evident that he had something to say to his son.

“I have no information to give you this time, Christy, in regard to the coming of blockade-runners or steamers for the Confederate navy,” said he. “But I have been instructed to use my own judgment in regard to what I may say to you about your orders. Of course you have observed that the blockading squadrons in the Gulf have been greatly reduced.”

“Only the *Bellevite* and *Holyoke* remained off the entrance to Mobile Bay,” added Christy. “We have had a very quiet time of it since I joined the *Bellevite*, and the action with the *Tallahatchie* was really the only event of any great importance in which I have been engaged.”

“The enemy and their British allies have been so unfortunate in the Gulf that they have chosen a safer approach to the shores of the South. Nearly all the blockade-runners at the present time go in at the Cape Fear River, where the shoal water favors them. A class of steamers of light draft and great speed are constructed expressly to go into Wilmington. Over \$65,000,000 have been invested in blockade-running; and in spite of the capture of at least one a week by our ships, the business appears to pay immense profits. The port of Charleston is closed to them now, as well as many others.”

“I have studied this locality of the coast at the mouth of the Cape Fear River, and the blockade-runners certainly have their best chance there,” said Christy.

“The whole attention of the government, so far as blockade-running is concerned, has been directed to the approaches of Wilmington. Forts Fisher, Caswell, and Smith afford abundant protection to the light draft steamers as soon as they get into the shoal water where our gunboats as a rule cannot follow them. The one thing we need down there is fast steamers. It is a stormy coast, and our smaller gunboats cannot safely lie off the coast.”

“I have read that a single successful venture in this business sometimes pays for the steamer many times over.”

“That is quite true, and the business prospers, though there are fifty or more Federal cruisers and gunboats patrolling the shore. Now, Christy, you are to be sent to this locality with the *St. Regis*; but you are to be in the outer circle of blockaders, so to speak, as your sealed orders will inform you.”

“Of course I shall obey my orders, whatever they are,” added the commander.

“I have nothing more to say, and you will regard what has passed between you and me as entirely confidential,” said Captain Passford, as he rose to leave the library.



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“By the way, father, what has become of Monsieur Gilfleur?” asked Christy. “I have not seen him since my return.”

“Just now he is working up a case of treason in Baltimore, though I expected him home before this time,” replied the captain.

“I am sorry I have not seen him, for he and I had become great friends before we parted. I think he is in some respects a remarkable man.”

“In his profession he is unexcelled; and what is more in that line, he is honest and reliable.”

“I learned all that of him while we were operating together. It is said, and I suppose it is true, that about every one of the blockaders makes a port at Halifax, the Bermudas, or Nassau, as much to learn the news and obtain a pilot, as to replenish their coal and stores.”

“That is unfortunately true; and the neutrality of these places is strained to its utmost tension, to say nothing of its manifest violations.”

“I think if Monsieur Gilfleur and myself could make another visit to the Bermudas and Nassau, we might pick up information enough to insure the capture of many blockade-runners, and perhaps of an occasional Confederate cruiser,” said Christy, laughing as he spoke.

“That is not the sort of business for a lieutenant-commander in the navy, my son; but I have thought of sending the detective on such a mission since the remarkable success you and he had in your former venture. But you escaped hanging or a Confederate prison only by the skin of your teeth. The difficulty in another enterprise of that sort would be for Mr. Gilfleur to put the information he obtained where it would do the most good. If he wrote letters, they would betray him; and if he went off in a Bahama boat, as he did before, we should have to keep a steamer cruising in the vicinity of his field of operations to meet him when he came off. I came to the conclusion that the scheme was impracticable, for it was only a combination of favorable circumstances that rendered your operations successful. I prefer to trust to the speed of the *St. Regis* to enable you to accomplish the same results off the coast,” said Captain Passford, as they left the library.

“I should really like to see Monsieur, for he is a very agreeable companion,” replied Christy.

“He would be exceedingly pleased to meet you again, for he had become very much attached to you.”

After lunch the same party that had visited the *St. Regis* the day before left on the train for New York, and proceeded to the navy yard from the foot of Grand Street, for all of them wished to see Christy off. Captain Passford, Junior, was received on board of his ship with all due form and ceremony. Paul Vapoor had been to his home for a brief visit to his mother and sisters; but he had gone to Bonnydale as early in the morning as it was decent to do so, and was all devotion to Florry.

Mr. Baskirk, the executive officer, had the ship in first-rate order when the commander went on board with his party; and as there was nothing for him to do, Christy devoted himself to the entertainment of his friends. The ladies with their escorts went all over the steamer again; the commander and Paul opened their staterooms for their examination, and Charley Graines showed them that of the first assistant engineer in the steerage.

“But you have a whole cabin to yourself, Christy,” said Bertha, after she looked into all the other rooms.



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“I have the honor to be the commander of the ship,” replied Christy lightly. “I have two state-rooms, so that if I had the happiness to relieve a forlorn maiden from captivity on board of one of the enemy’s vessels, as I did in your case, Bertha, I should have a better apartment to offer her than I had then.”

The first half of the afternoon passed away all too soon for those who were to sail on the tide, and those who were to return to Bonnydale. The commander took leave of his parents, his sister, and Bertha in his cabin, where Paul passed through the same ordeal with Miss Florry. The navy-yard tender was alongside; and the ladies were assisted on board of her by the officers, while the seamen under the direction of Mr. Makepeace were heaving up the anchor.

“Cable up and down, sir,” reported the second lieutenant.

This was the signal for the departure of the tender; and another hasty adieu followed, when the commander and the chief engineer hastened to the deck. The men forward had suspended their labor when the cable was up and down. The commander gave the order to weigh the anchor. The tide was still on the flood, and the head of the ship was pointed very nearly in the direction she was to sail.

“Anchor aweigh, sir!” reported Mr. Makepeace.

“Strike one bell, Mr. Baskirk,” said Christy; and the order was repeated to the quartermaster who was conning the wheel.

The screw of the *St. Regis* began to turn, and she went ahead very slowly. The tender was a short distance from her, and all the ladies were waving their handkerchiefs with all their might; and their signals were returned, not only by Christy and Paul, but by all the officers on deck. The seamen could not comfortably “hold in,” and they saluted the tender with three rousing cheers, for they knew that the family of their young commander were on board of her.

The little steamer followed the ship till she had passed the Battery, a repetition of the former salute, and then the tender sheered off, and went up North River, the ship proceeding on her course for the scene of her future exploits. The parting of Christy with his father, mother, and sister had been less sad than on former occasions; for they believed, whether with good reason or not, that the son, brother, and lover was to be exposed to less peril than usual.

Christy had received his sealed orders on board from an officer sent specially to deliver them to him in person; and he was instructed to open the envelope off Cape Henlopen. At six o’clock the *St. Regis* was off Sandy Hook. Four bells, which was the signal to the engine room to go ahead at full speed, had been sounded as soon as the ship had passed through the Narrows.

After the young commander had taken his supper, solitary and alone in his great cabin, he went on deck. No one shared his spacious apartment with him, and he was literally alone in his glory. But he did not object to his solitude, for he had enough to think of; and though he did not betray it in his expression, he was in a state of excitement, for what young fellow, even if “fully developed before he was twenty-one,” could have helped being exhilarated when he found himself in command of such an exceptionally fine and fast ship as the *St. Regis*.

When he went on deck, for he seemed to need more air than usual to support the immense amount of internal life that was stirring his being, he met Paul Vapoor coming up from the ward room, where he messed with seven other officers.



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“I hope you are feeling very well, Captain Passford,” said Paul, as he touched his cap to the commander, for all familiarities were suspended unless when they were alone; and habit generally banished them even then.

“As well as usual, Mr. Vapoor,” replied Christy. “How do you find the engine?”

“In excellent condition, Captain. It was thoroughly overhauled at the yard, boilers and machinery, and I have examined it down to the minutest details.”

“I have an idea that our speed will be more in demand than our fighting strength on this cruise,” added Christy.

“We are ready for speed in the engine room. The coal that remained on board on the arrival of the ship at the yard was very bad; but it has all been taken out, and our bunkers are filled with the best that could be had, the master-machinist informed me yesterday,” replied the chief engineer. “I don’t believe she could overhaul the Bellevite, for I am of the opinion that she is the fastest sea-going steamer in the navy.”

“I don’t think we shall find any blockade-runner that can run away from the Bellevite; for she has overhauled every one she chased off Mobile Bay, and made a prize of her. I am to open my orders off Henlopen, and then we shall know what our work is to be.”

“About eight hours from Sandy Hook, as we are running now,” added Paul.

“I am very impatient to read my orders, and I shall be called at one o’clock for that purpose,” added Christy, as he began to plank the deck on the weather side.

The wind was from the north-west, and quite fresh. The men had had their suppers, and he ordered Mr. Baskirk to make sail. The *St. Regis* was bark rigged, and could spread a large surface of canvas. He desired to test the qualities of his crew; and in a short time everything was drawing. Christy “turned in” at nine o’clock; but he was excited, and he had not slept a wink when he was called at the hour he had indicated.

