

VICTORIOUS UNION

by Oliver Optic

Chapter 29: The First Prize of the St. Regis

The shot from the Parrot passed between the funnel and the mainmast of the chase, as judged by the splash of the ball in the water just beyond her. It had come near enough to the mark to wake up the captain of the highflyer. He appeared to believe that the pursuer from the northward had simply cut him off by approaching on the shorter side of the triangle, and that all he had to do was to escape to the southward, evidently satisfied that no steamer in the Federal navy could overhaul him in a fair and square race.

“Now comes the tug of war,” said Mr. Baskirk, when the St. Regis had been headed for the chase.

“The game will not last all day,” added Christy. “If I owned that highflyer, I should not employ her present captain to sail her for me. He is overloaded with a blind confidence, and he has made a very bad use of his opportunities. If I had been in command of that steamer I should have made her course so as to run away from all three of my pursuers as soon as I made them out. It is six o’clock now, and I should have got far enough into the darkness to give them all the slip, and gone into Wilmington on a new track.”

“Her captain appears to trust entirely to his heels, and to look with contempt upon anything like manœuvring,” replied the first lieutenant.

“But we must finish him up before the darkness enables him to give us the slip. I have no doubt we could knock her all to pieces with the midship gun in the next fifteen minutes; but if she can make eighteen knots an hour, which we seem to be all agreed that she can do, she will not be a useless addition to the United States Navy, and it would be a pity to smash her up, for she is a good-looking craft. We are gaining two knots an hour on her, and Mr. Vapoor is keeping things warm in the engine and fire rooms.”

“That is taking an economical view of the subject,” added Mr. Baskirk, laughing at the commander’s utilitarian views.

“If we continue to fire into her, we must swing to every shot we send, and that would take so much from our speed,” argued Christy. “We are as sure of her as though we already had her in our clutches. There are plenty of officers in the navy who would like to command her when she is altered over into a cruiser.”

“You are quite right, Captain Passford; and there are some of them on the deck of the St. Regis at this moment,” said the first lieutenant, laughing.

“Heave the log, Mr. Baskirk,” said the captain.

The report from the master, who attended to this duty, was soon reported to the executive officer,



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who transmitted it to the commander.

“Rising twenty knots, sir,” said he.

“That will do,” replied Christy. “That is enough to enable us to overhaul the chase within half an hour.”

Within fifteen minutes it could be seen that the St. Regis was rapidly gaining on the Raven, for the latter was near enough now to enable the pursuers to read the name on her stern, and the captain of the highflyer could not help realizing that he had not the slightest chance to escape. The chaser was within the eighth of a mile of her, and the result was only a matter of minutes.

“She has stopped her screw, sir!” reported the third lieutenant in the waist, passing the word from the second lieutenant on the forecastle.

“She has stopped her screw, Captain,” repeated Mr. Baskirk.

“That means mischief,” replied Christy, as he directed his gaze to the Raven.

“She is getting out two boats on her port side!” shouted Mr. Makepeace from the top-gallant forecastle; and the report was repeated till it reached the commander, though he had heard it before it was officially communicated to him. “That means more mischief.”

“Ready to stop and back her!” he cried through the speaking-tube to the chief engineer.

“All ready, sir,” replied Paul.

“Some of these blockade-runners are desperate characters, and that captain intends either to burn or sink his ship,” continued Christy, with a trifle of excitement in his manner, though he looked as dignified as a college professor in the presence of his class.

The St. Regis was still rushing with unabated speed towards her prey, and a minute or two more would decide whether or not she was to be a prize or a blazing hulk on the broad ocean.

“Lay him aboard on the port side, Mr. Baskirk!”

“The two boats are there, Captain, as you can see,” replied the executive officer.

“Board on the port side, Mr. Baskirk!” repeated the commander very decidedly, and somewhat sharply; and at the same time he rang one bell on the gong to slow down the engine. “Board on the port side, Mr. Baskirk!” he repeated again. “Mr. Drake, have the steam pump and long hose ready to extinguish fire!”

Whether the captain of the Raven had ordered his men to scuttle the steamer, or to fire her in several places, Christy could not know; and he did not much care, for he was ready to meet either emergency. The St. Regis was bearing down on her victim with a reduced speed. The men forward and in the waist were all ready with the grappling irons to fasten to her, and the boarders were all prepared to leap upon her deck, though no fighting was expected.

The bow of the St. Regis was near the stem of the Raven, and Christy rang one bell to stop her, and then two to back her. Then he sprang upon the starboard rail of the ship where he could observe his men as they boarded the other steamer.

“What are you about, sir?” yelled a man on the quarter-deck of the Raven, who appeared to be the captain of the vessel, in a rude voice. “Don’t you see that you are crushing my two boats and the men in them?”

“I did not order the boats or the men there,” replied Christy calmly, and in a gentle tone, for the



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captain of the blockade-runner was not ten feet from him.

“I did,” added the captain of the prize, for such she really was by this time.

“Then you are responsible for them,” said the commander of the *St. Regis*.

“Do you mean to murder them?” gasped the other captain furiously.

“If they are killed you have sent them to their death!”

But the commander had no time to argue the matter with the irate captain. He had rung three bells, and the ship was backing at full speed. The momentum had not been sufficiently checked to stop her, and the two boats were crushed to splinters. The seamen who were in them saw what was coming, and they seized the ropes which had been dropped to them by the boarders on the rail at the command of the captain, who did not wish them to be sacrificed to the madness of their commander, and they climbed to the chains of the Federal ship with the aid of the boarders.

“Lay her aboard!” shouted Christy as soon as the headway of the ship had been checked, and the grappling irons had been made fast.

The willing and active seamen poured from the rails to the deck of the prize, their officers leading the way. The main hatch had been removed and a light smoke was coming up through the opening. The hose from the steam pump of the ship had been drawn on board, and the master was in charge of it. At the command of the officers the men leaped below at all the openings in the deck, and it was found that she had been fired in half a dozen places.

In most of them the combustibles had only been lighted a few moments before, and they had not become well-kindled. Except at the main hatch, the men extinguished the flames with their hands and feet, and a stream from the hose put out the one amidships. The hoseman shut off the water, and the ship’s company of the *St. Regis* were in full possession of the prize.

“Anything more to be done, Captain Bristler?” asked the mate, as he approached the commander.

“Nothing more can be done, Mr. Victor,” replied the captain, who appeared to be overwhelmed with wrath at the unexpected termination of his voyage. “It is too late to scuttle her, and that vampire of a Yankee has smashed both of our boats into kindling wood. We did not begin the end soon enough.”

But the beginning had evidently ended sooner than had been expected, and the *Raven* was the prize of the *St. Regis*. Christy still stood on the rail, and saw that all his orders had been executed to the letter. Mr. Makepeace had sent the carpenter and his gang into the hold, or as far as they could get, to ascertain if the steamer had been scuttled. It could not have been done without breaking out a portion of the cargo, and this would have been a work of no little time. The carpenter reported that everything was all right below the deck of the *Raven*, and the commander on the rail was so informed.

“This is a heathenish outrage, Captain, if a young cub like you can be the commander of a ship like that!” exclaimed Captain Bristler, foaming with rage over the result of the affair; and he interlarded his speech with all the oaths in the vocabulary of a pirate.

“Captain Bristler, when you address me as one gentleman should another, I will talk with you; but not till then,” replied Christy with dignity.

“A gentleman!” gasped the other captain. “You tried to murder half a dozen of my men! You are a Yankee pirate! That’s what you are!”



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We cannot soil this page with even a description of the oaths and curses with which he mixed his language. Christy was disgusted with him; and while he still continued his impious ravings, he sent a midshipman with an order to Mr. Makepeace who was in charge of the hose pipe on board of the Raven. While Captain Bristler was pouring forth anathemas that made the blood of the loyal officers run cold in their veins, the man who held the hose pipe directed it to him, and the water was turned on.

The stream struck the commander with force enough to knock him down. But the bath was not suspended on that account, and it was continued till it had extinguished the fire of profanity. Christy made a sign, and the steam-pump ceased to work. The mate rushed to the assistance of the captain, put him on his feet, and was conducting him towards the companion, seeking a retreat in his cabin; but he was silent, perhaps from his inability to speak.

“Stop, Mr. Victor!” called Christy to the mate. “I cannot trust that man to remain on board of the Raven”; and at the same time he directed Mr. Baskirk to have him arrested and put in irons, if he was violent.

“But this gentleman is the commander of the steamer,” interposed the mate.

“I don’t care what he is; if he were a gentleman, as you call him, I would treat him like one; but he is a brute, and I shall treat him as such,” replied Christy, as two of his men, attended by two more, laid hands on the dripping captain. “You may send his clothes on board of this ship, Mr. Victor. Have him committed to the brig, Master-at-Arms.”

There was no appeal from the decision of Commander Passford, for his authority was supreme. The refractory commander was committed to the brig of the St. Regis, and his own steward was sent to him with his clothes, with order to exchange his wet garments for dry ones.

“Sail, ho!” shouted the man on the cross trees, who had remained there during the scene which had just transpired, while the commander was descending from the rail.

Possibly the lookout man had been more attentive to the proceedings on the deck of the Raven than to his duty, for the sail must have been in sight some little time before he reported it. The two steamers, which had been vainly chasing the prize, were now within half a mile of the St. Regis.

