

VICTORIOUS UNION

by Oliver Optic

Chapter 30: Another Sailing Contest Inaugurated

Although the Raven had not yet been disposed of, the ship's company were immediately interested in the vessel which the lookout had tardily announced; and the vigor with which he had given the hail to the deck indicated that he was conscious of the defect.

"Where away?" returned Mr. Baskirk; though it was a superfluous question, for all on the deck who cast their eyes to the westward could see the sail.

"On the starboard, sir."

Commander Passford was already examining the distant sail with his glass, as were all the officers who were not otherwise occupied. There were fog banks in that direction; and the craft might have suddenly loomed up out of them, though this did not appear to have been the case. The sail was too far off to be made out with anything like distinctness. It was a steamer headed to the east, and the quantity of smoke that trailed in the air above indicated that she had been liberal in the use of coal in her furnaces.

As the sail was diminishing her distance from the St. Regis, Christy turned his attention again to the prize alongside his ship. The two chasers that had been pursuing the Raven, neither of which appeared to be capable of making more than fourteen knots an hour, were now almost within hailing distance.

The Raven was a steamer of nearly the size of the St. Regis. She was not armed, and had a ship's company of about thirty men, including officers. Her cargo was miscellaneous in its character, consisting of such merchandise as was most needed in the Confederacy, especially in the army. A watch had been set below on board of her to extinguish fires if any more appeared; but this peril had been effectually removed. The attempt to destroy the steamer and her cargo looked like malice and revenge, and some of the officers of the ship thought it ought to be regarded and treated as an act of war.

To burn, scuttle, blow up, run ashore, or otherwise destroy a blockade-runner after her situation has become absolutely hopeless can result only to the benefit of the enemy, since it deprived the Federals of the property that would otherwise be confiscated under international law. But blockade-runners are regarded as neutrals unless proved to be Americans, in which case they are subject to the penalties of treason, and the forfeiture of the ship and cargo is the only punishment.

Christy had never been able to regard this class of persons with much respect, for they appeared to be in league with the enemy. Captain Bristler had not only attempted to break through the blockade, which he and many of his countrymen regarded as a legitimate business; but he had attempted to burn his vessel. He had got out his boats; and when she was wrapped in flames, he evidently expected the



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Federal victor to pick up himself and his ship's company, and treat the whole of them as though they had not been, at least constructively if not really, in the service of the enemy.

"The cold water applied to the commander of the Raven has had a good effect upon him," said the first lieutenant, as he touched his cap on the quarter-deck of the *St. Regis*. "He sends word that he regrets his conduct, and asks to be released from confinement."

"He has behaved himself more like a swine than a gentleman; but I have no ill-will towards him, for I regarded him as beneath my contempt," replied Captain Passford. "I can understand his condition, for of course he is suffering under a tremendous disappointment; but that does not atone for his brutality."

"Certainly not, sir. He was running away from the two blockaders that were pursuing him, and had beaten them both. He was absolutely sure of his escape till he encountered the fleet in shore when the *St. Regis* came upon the scene," added Mr. Baskirk.

"Her captain had no particular respect for our steamer when he saw her, and kept on his course as if in contempt of her, till we dropped a shot near him. If he had headed to the south when he first made out the *St. Regis*, he would have improved his chances, but he would only have given us a longer chase. Let Captain Bristler out of the brig, Mr. Baskirk; we will see if he can behave himself any better; but I will not allow any man to swear at me if I can help myself."

A little later Captain Bristler came on deck in charge of the ship's corporal. He was dressed in his best clothes, and his personal appearance had been greatly improved.

"Captain Passford," said he, raising his cap to the commander, "under the influence of my awful disappointment at the failure of the Raven to outsail you, I was rude and ungentlemanly, and some of my forecabin habits came back to me. I beg your pardon; and I shall show you that I know how to be a gentleman, if I did forget myself for a time."

"That is sufficient, and I accept your apology, Captain Bristler," replied Christy with abundant dignity.

"I did not believe there was a ship in the Federal navy that could outsail the Raven, for she was built more for speed than for cargo," continued the captain of the prize.

"The *St. Regis* is not the only one that can outsail the Raven. I have served in a steamer that could beat her four knots an hour in an emergency," added Christy.

"What steamer is that, Captain?" asked Captain Bristler.

"That is not important, but it was the one that outsailed and captured the *St. Regis* when she had another name."

"Then your ship was a blockade-runner?"

"She was, and also a Confederate man-of-war; she was the *Trafalgar*."

"Ah! Then I know her very well; and the company owning the Raven, of which I am a member, offered nearly double what it cost to build the Raven for her," replied Captain Bristler. "I can understand now how I happened to be so thoroughly beaten in the last chase. She was built for a yacht, and no money was spared upon her."

By this time the two steamers that had first chased the Raven had stopped their screws, and a boat was on its way from each of them. The two cutters came up to the gangway, and the officer in



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each ascended to the deck. Christy permitted the captain of the Raven to take care of himself, while he waited for the visitors to present themselves.

“I am very glad to see you, Mr. Amblen!” exclaimed Christy, as he extended his hand; for he recognized in the first officer the gentleman who had been his third lieutenant in the Bronx.

“I am delighted to see you again, Captain Passford,” replied Lieutenant Amblen, for such was his present rank. “I am now the executive officer of the Muskegon. I have the pleasure of presenting to you Mr. Cartright, first lieutenant of the St. Croix.”

“I am happy to meet you, Mr. Cartright.”

“I have often heard of you, Captain Passford, and I am glad to see you in command of so fine and fast a steamer as the St. Regis, though I never heard of her before,” added the executive officer of the St. Croix. “Of course you are aware that there is a steamer in sight to the westward of us.”

“I am aware of it; and for that reason we should hasten our present business,” replied Christy, as he glanced at the steamer in the distance and the trails of smoke astern of her. “I do not know who is the ranking officer here; and I have not yet reported to the admiral, for I took part in the chase from the moment of my arrival.”

“You are a lieutenant”—Mr. Amblen began.

“A lieutenant-commander, if you please,” interposed Christy with a smile.

“Then you are the ranking officer, Captain Passford, for both of the other commanders are lieutenants,” added the executive officer of the Muskegon. “We are ready to transmit your orders to our superiors.”

“My orders will depend somewhat upon the steamer astern of us; and if you will excuse me a few moments, I shall soon be ready to issue them,” replied Christy, as he took his spy-glass from the brackets, and directed it to the approaching steamer from the west. “What do you make of her, Mr. Baskirk?”

The executive officer had been observing the steamer astern with his glass; and she was not more than four miles distant by this time.

“She is a large vessel, I judge, not less than a thousand tons. She has all sail set and drawing, and she seems to be making very rapid progress through the water,” replied the first lieutenant. “But there are not less than three steamers pursuing her, though they are a long way astern of her.”

“I make out the chasers, and I should judge that she is getting away from them,” added Christy.

“The leading steamer is turning her head to the south!” exclaimed Mr. Baskirk, with no little excitement in his manner.

“I only wonder she has not done so before,” added the commander, rejoining the officers of the other steamers. “I believe Captain Wright of the Muskegon outranks Captain Boyden of the St. Croix,” he continued.

“He does, Captain Passford,” replied Mr. Amblen.

“If you will excuse me a moment, I will write an order for him;” and Christy retired to his cabin for this purpose.

His communication directed Captain Wright to take possession of the Raven, and treat her precisely as though she were the prize of the Muskegon and her consort; and constructively she was



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concerned in the capture of the vessel, especially in the distribution of the prize-money. He added to the order the fact that what appeared to be a blockade-runner astern of his ship was outsailing her pursuers, and the *St. Regis* being a very fast steamer, his duty did not permit him to make any further delay in taking part in the chase.

With this order in the hands of Mr. Amblen, Christy took leave of the two officers and they departed in their boats. But he was obliged to await the arrival of one or both of the blockaders before starting the screw, for he was not willing to leave any number of his crew in charge of the prize. While he was waiting, he wrote a letter to the acting admiral of the station, announcing his arrival, and copying into it the material portion of his orders from the department.

The *Muskegon* was the first to come alongside of the *Raven*, which she did on the starboard side. Captain Wright, crossing the deck of the *Raven*, presented himself to Captain Passford on the quarter-deck of the *St. Regis*; he was received with Christy's accustomed politeness, and the prize was handed over to him verbally, as it had been done before in writing.

Captain Wright began to compliment Captain Passford, with whose brilliant reputation he was already very familiar; but Christy interposed, declaring that he was in a great hurry, and could hear no more, if his orders were clearly understood. Mr. Baskirk had directed the recall of all the ship's company, with the exception of a master's mate, who was to remain on board to give any further information needed to the officers of the *Muskegon*, and to be a witness in New York at the prize court.

Captain Bristler and his effects were sent back to the *Raven*, the grappling irons and the fasts were cast off, and the *St. Regis* backed out from her position on the port side of the prize. During all this time Christy was very busy with his glass. As Mr. Baskirk had discovered, the leading steamer had three blockaders in chase of her. She was now headed to the south, having done so as soon as she saw the four vessels lying in her course.

"Make the course south-west by south, Mr. Baskirk," said the young commander, after he had brought his trigonometry into use again.

Then it became a very exciting question to ascertain which was the faster steamer of the two.

