



VOL. XLI

JULY, 1912

No. 1

A Naval Affair of the Revolutionary War

The Story of Rebecca Chester

By C. M. Chester

New London, Conn., was one of the first settlements made in the new country, having been founded in 1643 by John Winthrop, and through the natural advantages of its location it rapidly assumed an important position among the colonies. At the time of the Revolutionary War it had acquired a considerable trade with Europe and the West Indies and ranked as one of the principal ports of the country.

The inhabitants of New London were a hardy seafaring race—Vikings of the North—who left their native land to take part in the great movement for world expansion inaugurated early in the seventeenth century by the mother country, or were descendants of that intrepid band of pioneers who landed at Plymouth Rock in 1620. They made their livelihood either on the sea, or in connection with the trade incident to its traffic, and were, therefore, well prepared to take a leading part in the naval operations of the Colonies, which began soon after the breaking out of the war. Indeed, it may be said that the American navy was founded here, as the first naval expedition authorized by act of the Colonial Congress was fitted out at New London as

early as 1776. Commodore Hopkins was given command of this little fleet, which was composed of the *Alfred*, *Columbus*, *Andrea-Doria*, and *Cabot*. One captain and several of the officers were from New London. Some enterprising young seamen of the city were appointed midshipmen, and eighty of the crew were from the town and neighborhood.

The fleet started early in February and returned to New London in April of the same year, after raiding the British port of New Providence, capturing seventy prisoners, more than eighty pieces of cannon, and a large quantity of military and naval stores. While the commodore was landing his prisoners and stores in New London harbor General Washington stopped over, en route from Boston to New York, with the army under his command, to confer with Commodore Hopkins, then commander-in-chief of the navy, on naval matters, as he realized that one of the principal efforts of the Colonists in the prosecution of the war should be to embarrass the enemy's line of communication, on which they relied to reinforce their exhausted army and replenish their supplies. During

the war no less than two hundred vessels, sixteen hundred guns and seven thousand seven hundred men were furnished by the little State of Connecticut. Most of the vessels were fitted out at New London, and the records of the port indicate that the privateers issuing from this town captured from the enemy their full share of the six hundred craft which struck their flags to the American naval volunteer force during the war, or about one prize for each unit of the fleet.

This brief outline of New London's activity during those perilous times in our national history forms a basis for the story which follows.

In Groton, a beautiful suburb on the eastern shore of the Thames River, opposite New London, lived Rebecca Chester, a daughter of James Chester and Thankful (Packard) Chester. She was born in the homestead which stood 150 yards from the famous tomb of Benedict Arnold, Fort Griswold, the site of which had been deeded to the Government by her grandfather, Capt. John Chester. Rebecca was the youngest child and only daughter of the family, having four brothers, all of whom were in the service of their country.

Curiously the date of Rebecca's birth, 1763, was just one hundred years after her great-grandfather, Samuel Chester, planted a branch of the Chester family tree in the eastern part of Connecticut. This ancestor's name was handed down to posterity as the given name of one of his descendants in connection with an exceptionally bright page of American history. He located in New London in 1663. He had a large landed estate, partly on the east side of the river, now Groton, covering the ground where Fort Griswold and Groton monument stood later; also large tracts to the north and south of Groton Point, on which his sons, Abraham, John, and Jonathan, settled and reared large families. A deed to Captain Chester was signed by Uncas (Indian sachem) June 13, 1683, of a grant of several thousand acres in Colchester.

Although a sea captain during the early part of his life, Captain Chester was skilled in surveying as well as in navigation, which was of great value to him in laying out lands in the new settlement. He was faithful, just, loyal, and persistent in the rights of the Colonies. Capt. John Chester, son of Samuel Chester, also held many posi-

tions of trust in the community and bequeathed a goodly inheritance to his son, James Chester, father of Rebecca. James Chester died in 1771, but a short time before the beginning of the Revolutionary War. During this critical period Rebecca was left with her widowed mother to bear the trials and hardships incident to the war. She had been tenderly reared and was just budding into womanhood. As hardship and responsibility often develop the finest traits of character, the terrible struggle for life and liberty through which her country was passing made of the timid girl one of the strong, noble women who helped to shape the destiny of the nation.

Rebecca's four brothers were each at his post of duty on the ocean. During one of the numerous conflicts on Long Island Sound Caleb, the youngest, was captured and sent to one of the New York prison ships, where the cruelties and atrocities heaped upon its victims called forth the odium of the people and disgraced the mother country.

Later (in the year 1777) Caleb was released from confinement and permitted to return to his family. Shortly after his return he was stricken with smallpox, which, he stated with positive conviction, had been contracted on board the prison-ship as a result of mixing the virus of the terrible disease in a drink, ostensibly offered in good fellowship, but in reality for the purpose of spreading the disease and depleting the colony of New London. The young man's mother and two of his brothers (who were helping protect the town from impending invasion) also succumbed to the scourge, leaving Rebecca the sole survivor of the home circle. With such a family history one can well understand that the young girl had no love for the enemies of her country.

Shortly following her bereavement, in October, 1778, an incident occurred in the little town of Groton which was to have a marked influence on the life of Rebecca Chester. While a British squadron belonging to the fleet of Admiral Lord Howe lay in the sound engaged in devastating the New England coast, a boat expedition was sent out in charge of a young officer, Lieut. John Reid, R. N., to capture whatever could be found of value to the crews of the ships, and also to injure the colonists in every way possible. During this time the small force left to defend the town planned

a counter-stroke. Accordingly from Mystic, which lies a few miles to the eastward of Groton Long Point, a boat was fitted out with empty barrels, bags, etc., to simulate merchandise, with a view to draw the attention, but not the fire, of the enemy. The boat proceeded toward Long Point, off which the squadron was stationed, with two men laboring at the oars, as if overburdened with their load, seemingly unconscious that they were running into danger, until, not far from the point, which here extends some distance into the sound, they espied a fully manned cutter approaching with all haste. The two Americans, apparently in great consternation, then pulled

it was a "Yankee trick," but took his misfortune with as good grace as possible under the circumstances.

The prisoners were hastily assembled and marched to Fort Griswold under guard and here Lieutenant Reid was confined for a while as a hostage, but eventually released and given the freedom of the place under parole.

During his parole the young officer was privileged to mingle in the social life of the place, which he found most attractive. Lieutenant Reid was a descendant of Henry Reid, Earl of Orkney and Lord High Admiral to Robert Bruce III., King of Scotland, 1393, a young man in the



OLD CHESTER HOMESTEAD, GROTON CONNECTICUT, BUILT 1660. STILL STANDING

their boat for the shore and ran it high and dry at a point that had been previously selected. The English barge, with thirty or more men on board, and Lieutenant Reid in command, rushed after the retreating boatmen, landing near where their craft had been beached. A few rods away lay concealed a military company under the command, by chance, of one of Rebecca Chester's relatives. The force, fully armed, arose from an advantageous position and fired at the barge, which was by this time aground, and the crew, being unable to defend itself from this unexpected assault, was forced to surrender.

The lieutenant, standing in the stern of his boat, folded his arms and declared that

splendid vigor and enthusiasm of youth, enhanced by the brilliancy of his uniform and nature's liberal endowments, carrying with it all an elegance and ease of manner that stamped him at once as of noble birth and high breeding.

Thus equipped, it was not strange that his sudden appearance in the midst of this small and exclusive circle caused many a girlish heart to flutter. His associations with these brave, struggling people (so in contrast to the vanity and hollowness of the court life to which he had been accustomed) awakened in him his higher and nobler nature. He had learned the tragedy of Rebecca Chester's life—and even before meeting her found his sympathies were en-

listed toward those who had so suffered.

A closer study into the growing discontent and the righteousness of their cause, especially the suffering and poverty entailed by heavy taxation, aroused his sense of justice. He felt the weight of the burden his king had put upon these persecuted people. He realized with a feeling of deepest loss that the gap between the mother country and those who were fighting for the dearest thing in life (their liberty) was wider than the ocean and could never be bridged. Many doubts filled his troubled mind as to the justice of the cause of his country. While in this disturbed condition he was first privileged to meet Rebecca Chester, the acknowledged leader of the social life of the place, not only through her near relationship to Colonel Ledyard, the commander of the New London post, but her personality had won for her that position. The sorrows through which she had passed and the seeming hopelessness of her country's cause, however, gave her no heart to mingle in the gaieties surrounding her.

One evening, through his earnest and repeated solicitation, the lieutenant was permitted to visit her home with a mutual and devoted friend. As they passed to the rear of the old Colonial mansion, guided by a gleam of light from the window, the young officer could not resist the temptation held out to him from within to gaze upon one of the loveliest domestic pictures pen or artist could portray. Rebecca was sitting at her spinning wheel, all unconscious of the truant eyes that were feasting on her beauty. Her sad expression, giving a tone of dignity to the rare loveliness of her face, held the young man spellbound. He could but compare her to the cold and artificial women he had known in English society. By the fireside sat her aged grandmother, who shared with Rebecca the trials and hardships incident to the ravages the war had made upon this once distinguished home.

As the officer and his companion entered Rebecca, not at all disconcerted by the attractiveness of the stranger or the brilliancy of the gold lace, greeted them with her usual hospitality and simple dignity. She at once recognized the young officer's identity, having heard much of the town gossip concerning him.

An unusual feeling of embarrassment assailed the lieutenant. He knew even at the

threshold that Rebecca Chester was the one woman his soul was seeking, and with this knowledge his effort to utter some commonplace platitudes hopelessly failed, and he remained a silent and uninteresting guest, only summoning courage at the eve of departure to ask permission for a second call. Other meetings followed and the young enthusiast lost no opportunity of showing Rebecca the admiration he felt. Thus swiftly and happily passed many days for the young officer, until, overcome by the impetuosity of youth and the proverbial rashness of brass buttons, he boldly confessed his love.

Rebecca's heart was still lacerated with the memory of the sufferings she had endured from his countrymen, and although fascinated by his charm of manner, and finding much pleasure in his society, she repelled the suggestion of uniting her fate with one whom she supposed to be in sympathy with the enemies of her persecuted people. She did not know (for he had scarcely acknowledged to himself) the great sympathy he felt for her and the little colony—a feeling that had been accentuated by the knowledge of her personal sorrows. His urgent and repeated wooing brought forth from the young maiden a strong and emphatic "No, I can never marry a British officer."

At this critical time occurred the terrible massacre of Fort Griswold, which made one of the blackest chapters in British history. The storming and capture of Fort Griswold and the tragic death of Colonel Ledyard and its brave defenders are too well known to all readers of history for repetition here. Rebecca's sensitive heart suffered with the fresh wounds caused by the wholesale and cruel slaughter of those she had known from childhood. As she gazed upon the scene of desolation and death in the early morning after this memorable day of wanton bloodshed, it seemed to Rebecca that her whole world had been swept away, the sun revealing such pictures of misery and suffering as to cause the stoutest hearts to faint, and her soul writhed in agony and bitterness toward those who had caused such destruction of life and property. She saw the burning embers of the home of her beloved father, her grandfather and her great-grandfather, the enemy thus cutting off her last home

(Continued on page 19.)

(Continued from page 4.)

tie, and far off at the distant point on which the British troops had landed and embarked the smoke was rising from the ashes of the buildings on an uncle's estate.

The only real property that was left to any of that large family founded by Samuel Chester in Groton was the old Chester homestead, a mile to the southward of the fort, which had been used by the English troops during their occupation for commissary purposes, and which for this reason, perhaps, but more likely because of their hurried flight, escaped destruction. But the hearts of that sorrowing and grief-stricken household were indifferent and unconscious of the perils by fire that threatened them. Greater sorrow shadowed this threshold.

Two sons from the family circle had fallen, and one taken prisoner in this battle of terrible carnage, while the fourth and only remaining adult son of the Thomas Chester branch, distinguished for his bravery and destructive work to the enemy on the sea, was soon to die by disease contracted in a British prison-ship, thus leaving the parents desolate and heartbroken. At this time Rebecca Chester's sympathetic heart turned to her aged and suffering kinsmen, whose home, like her own, had been so desolated.

The details of the Fort Griswold fight removed the few remaining shackles from Lieutenant Reid's eyes. Standing on Groton Heights, viewing the desolation and carnage before him, he bared his head and vowed in the presence of the sad little circle of mourners about him that he would henceforth give his fortune and his life, if need be, to defend a cause so just and righteous against such cowardice and cruelty.

Our heroine then succumbed to the charms and fascinations of the gallant

lant young convert, his sworn allegiance to her beloved country breaking down the last barrier to the love which was already in her heart.

This sketch closes with the ringing of the wedding bells. The old pastor, who has known and loved the beautiful young bride from childhood and watched the career of the man of her choice with pride, invokes a blessing on these two young lives with all the earnestness of his soul. Never was a benediction more sacred, a "God bless you!" more sincere.

Two sons blessed this union, the elder not surviving his boyhood. To the younger, Samuel Chester Reid, born in Norwich, Conn., August 25, 1783, our country owes a debt of gratitude. Thirty years from this date he became famous as Captain Samuel Chester Reid, of the privateer brig *General Armstrong*.

I am not permitted to relate the deeds of the son of Rebecca Chester at this time, but must quote, briefly, the impressive utterances of ex-President Roosevelt regarding his chief claim to fame.

As Mr. Roosevelt was passing by the Port of Horta, Island of Fayal, Azorean group, on his way to Africa a short while ago, he pointed into the little harbor, gesticulating energetically, and saying: "In there was fought one of the most remarkable battles history records, and one of the least known. It prevented reinforcements for the British army at New Orleans reaching their destination, and saved Louisiana from invasion. It is a story that should send a thrill of patriotism up and down the spinal column of every true American."

Officially, while President, Mr. Roosevelt placed the name of Samuel Chester Reid at the head of a long list of American heroes who were to be honored in naming torpedo cruisers in the navy.

Apostrophe to the Flag, from the Elk's Ritual

"No such red in budding rose, in falling leaf, or sparkling wine.

No such white in April blossom, in crescent moon, in mountain snow.

No such blue in woman's eye, in ocean depths, or Heaven's dome.

And no such pageantry of clustering stars and streaming light in all the spectrum of the sea and sky."