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**CLIVE
CUSSLER**

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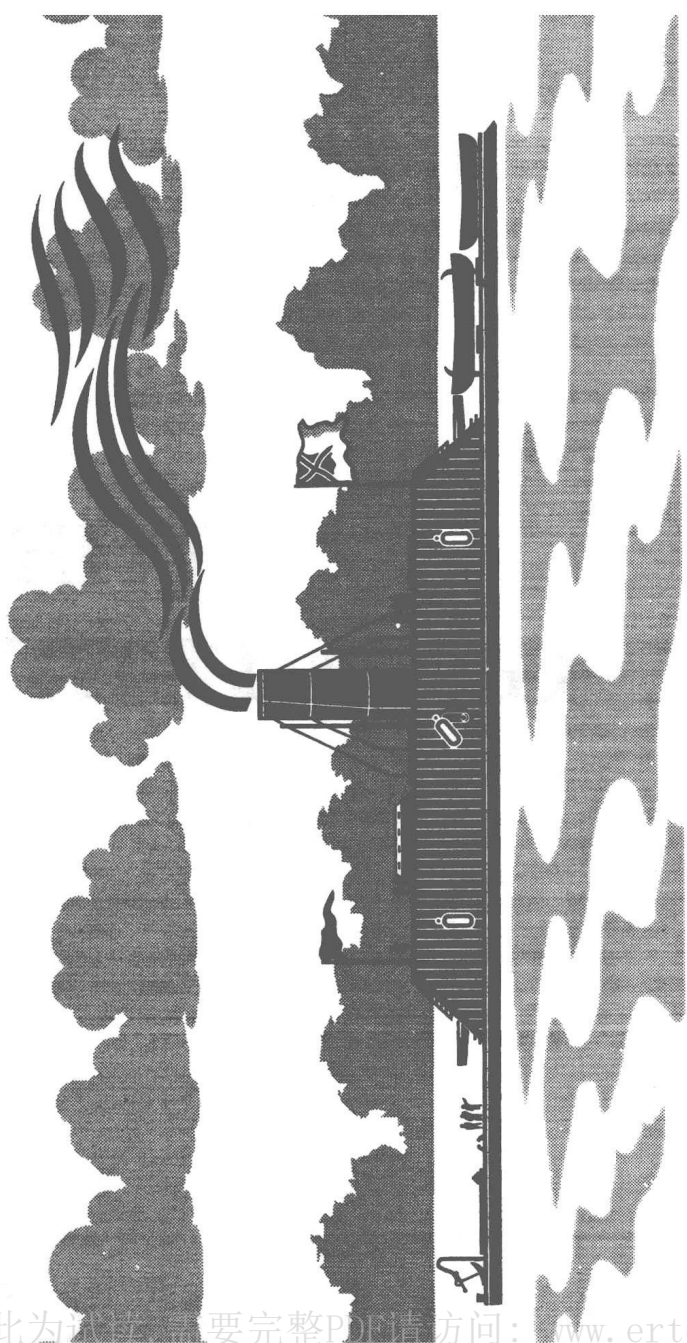
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THE GAUNTLET



CONFEDERATE STATES SHIP TEXAS

April 2, 1865
Richmond, Virginia

She seemed to float above the ghostly evening mist like a menacing beast rising from the primeval ooze. Her low silhouette stood black and ominous against the backdrop of the trees along the shoreline. Shadowy, phantom-like images of men moved across her decks under the eerie yellow glow of lanterns as moisture trickled down her gray, sloping sides and dripped into the sluggish current of the James River.

The *Texas* tugged at her dockside mooring line as impatiently as a hound about to be unleashed for the hunt. Thick iron shutters covered her gun-ports and the 6-inch armor on her casemate showed no markings. Only a white and red battle ensign atop the mast behind her smokestack, hanging limp in the damp atmosphere, signified her as a warship of the Confederate States Navy.

To landsmen she looked squat and ugly, but to sailors there was a character and grace about her that was unmistakable. She was tough, and she was deadly, the last of her peculiar design that set sail on a cruise to extinction after a brief but enduring burst of glory.

Commander Mason Tombs stood on the forward deck,

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pulled a blue bandana from a pocket, and dabbed at the dampness that seeped inside the collar of his uniform. The loading was going slow, too slow. The *Texas* would need every minute of available darkness for her escape to the open sea. He watched anxiously as his crew swore and strained while they manhandled wooden crates across a gangplank and down an open hatch on the deck. The crates seemed unusually heavy for containing the written records of the four-year-old government. They came from mule-drawn wagons deployed near the dock that were strongly guarded by the battle-weary survivors of a Georgia infantry company.

Tombs turned an uneasy eye toward Richmond, only 2 miles to the north. Grant had broken Lee's stubborn defense of Petersburg, and now the battered army of the South was retreating toward Appomattox and abandoning the Confederate capital to the advancing Union forces. The evacuation was underway and the city was filled with confusion as riots and pillaging swept the streets. Explosions shook the ground and flames burst into the night as warehouses and arsenals filled with supplies of war were put to the torch.

Tombs was ambitious and energetic, one of the finest naval officers in the Confederacy. He was a short, handsome-faced man with brown hair and eyebrows, a thick red beard, and a flinty look in his olive black eyes.

Commander of small gunboats at the battles of New Orleans and Memphis, gunnery officer on board the fighting ironclad *Arkansas*, and first officer of the infamous sea raider *Florida*, Tombs had proven a dangerous man for the Union cause. He had assumed command of the *Texas* only a week after she was completed at the Rocketts naval yard in Richmond, having demanded and supervised a number of modifications in preparation for an almost impossible voyage downriver past a thousand Union guns.

He turned his attention back to the cargo loading as the last wagon pulled away from the dock and disappeared into the night. He slipped his watch from a pocket, opened the lid, and held up the face toward a lantern that hung on a dock piling.

It read eight-twenty. Little more than eight hours left

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before daylight. Not enough time to run the last 20 miles of the gauntlet under the cloak of darkness.

An open carriage pulled by a team of dappled horses rolled up and stopped beside the dock. The driver sat stiffly without turning as the two passengers watched the final few crates being lowered through the hatch. The heavier man in civilian clothes slouched tiredly while the other, who was wearing an officer's naval uniform, spied Tombs and waved.

Tombs stepped across the plank onto the dock, approached the carriage, and saluted smartly. "An honor, Admiral, Mr. Secretary. I didn't think either of you would have time for a farewell."

Admiral Raphael Semmes, famed for his exploits as captain of the Confederate sea wolf, *Alabama*, and now commander of the James River squadron of ironclad gunboats, nodded and smiled through a heavily waxed moustache and a small goatee protruding beneath his lower lip. "A regiment of Yankees couldn't have kept me from seeing you off."

Stephen Mallory, Secretary of the Confederate States Navy, stretched out a hand. "Too much is riding on you for us not to take the time to wish you luck."

"I've a stout ship and a brave crew," said Tombs with confidence. "We'll break through."

Semmes' smile faded and his eyes filled with foreboding. "If you find it impossible, you must burn and scuttle the ship in the deepest part of the river so that our archives can never be salvaged by the Union."

"The charges are in place and primed," Tombs assured Semmes. "The bottom hull will be blown away, dropping the weighted crates in the river mud while the ship continues a safe distance away under full steam before sinking."

Mallory nodded. "A sound plan."

The two men in the carriage exchanged strange knowing looks. An awkward moment passed. Then Semmes said, "I'm sorry to lay another burden on your shoulders at the last moment, but you will also be responsible for a passenger."

"Passenger?" Tombs repeated grimly. "No one who values his life I trust."

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"He has no choice in the matter," Mallory muttered.

"Where is he?" Tombs demanded, gazing around the dock. "We're almost ready to cast off."

"He will arrive shortly," replied Semmes.

"May I ask who *he* is?"

"You will recognize him easily enough," said Mallory. "And pray the enemy also identifies him should you need to put him on display."

"I don't understand."

Mallory smiled for the first time. "You will, my boy, you will."

"A piece of information you may find useful," said Semmes, changing the subject. "My spies report that our former ironclad ram, the *Atlanta*, captured last year by Yankee monitors, has been pressed into service by the Union navy and is patrolling the river above Newport News."

Tombs brightened. "Yes, I see. Since the *Texas* has the same general shape and approximate dimensions she could be mistaken for the *Atlanta* in the dark."

Semmes nodded and handed him a folded flag. "The stars and stripes. You'll need it for the masquerade."

Tombs took the Union banner and held it under one arm. "I'll have it run up the mast shortly before we reach the Union artillery emplacements at Trent's Reach."

"Then good luck to you," said Semmes. "Sorry we can't stay to see you cast off, but the Secretary has a train to catch and I have to return to the fleet and oversee its destruction before the Yankees are upon us."

The Secretary of the Confederate navy shook Tombs' hand once more. "The blockade runner *Fox* is standing by off Bermuda to recoal your bunkers for the next leg of your voyage. Good fortune to you, Commander. The salvation of the Confederacy is in your hands."

Before Tombs could reply, Mallory ordered the carriage driver to move on. Tombs raised his hand in a final salute and stood there, his mind failing to comprehend the Secretary's farewell. Salvation of the Confederacy? The words made no sense. The war was lost. With Sherman

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moving north from the Carolinas and Grant surging south through Virginia like a tidal wave, Lee would be caught between the Union pincers and forced to surrender in a matter of days. Jefferson Davis would soon be broken from President of the Confederate States to a common fugitive.

And within a few short hours, the *Texas* had every expectation of being the last ship of the Confederate navy to die a watery death.

Where was the salvation should the *Texas* make good her escape? Tombs failed to fathom a vague answer. His orders were to transport the government's archives to a neutral port of his choosing and remain out of sight until contacted by courier. How could the successful smuggling of bureaucratic records possibly prevent the certain defeat of the South?

His thoughts were interrupted by his first officer, Lieutenant Ezra Craven.

"The loading is completed and the cargo stored, sir," announced Craven. "Shall I give the order to cast off?"

Tombs turned. "Not yet. We have to take on a passenger."

Craven, a big brusque Scotsman, spoke with a peculiar combination of brogue and southern drawl. "He'd better make it damned quick."

"Is Chief Engineer O'Hare ready to get underway?"

"His engines have a full head of steam."

"And the gun crews?"

"Manning their stations."

"We'll stay buttoned up until we meet the Federal fleet. We can't afford to lose a gun and crew from a lucky shot through a port beforehand."

"The men won't take kindly to turning the other cheek."

"Tell them they'll live longer—"

Both men swung and stared toward the shore at the sound of approaching hooves. A few seconds later a Confederate officer rode out of the darkness and onto the dock.

"One of you Commander Tombs?" he asked in a tired voice.

"I'm Tombs," he said, stepping forward.

The rider swung down from his horse and saluted. He was

covered with road dust and looked exhausted. "My compliments, sir. Captain Neville Brown, in charge of the escort for your prisoner."

"Prisoner," Tombs echoed. "I was told he was a passenger."

"Treat him as you will," Brown shrugged indifferently.

"Where is he?" Tombs asked for the second time that night.

"Immediately behind. I rode out in advance of my party to warn you not to be alarmed."

"Is the man daft?" muttered Craven. "Alarmed at what?"

His question was answered as a closed coach rumbled onto the dock surrounded by a detachment of riders dressed in the blue uniform of Union cavalry.

Tombs was on the verge of shouting for his crew to run out the guns and repel boarders when Captain Brown calmly reassured him. "Rest easy, Commander. They're good southern boys. Dressing up like Yankees was the only way we could pass safely through Union lines."

Two of the men dismounted and opened the door of the coach and helped the passenger through the door. A very tall, gaunt man with a familiar beard stepped tiredly to the wooden planking of the dock. He wore manacles that were attached by chains to his wrists and ankles. He studied the ironclad for a moment through solemn eyes, and then turned and nodded at Tombs and Craven.

"Good evening, gentlemen," he spoke in a voice pitched slightly high. "Am I to assume I'm to enjoy the hospitality of the Confederate navy?"

Tombs did not reply, he could not reply. He stood there rooted with Craven in blank disbelief, their expressions matched in total mystification.

"My God," Craven finally murmured. "If you're a fake, sir, you're a good one."

"No," the prisoner replied. "I assure you, I am the genuine article."

"How is this possible?" Tombs asked, completely unprepared.

Brown remounted his horse. "There's no time for an explanation. I have to lead my men across the river over the

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Richmond bridge before it is blown up. He's your responsibility now."

"What am I supposed to do with him?" Tombs demanded.

"Keep him confined on board your ship until you receive orders for his release. That's all I've been told to pass on."

"This is crazy."

"So is war, Commander," Brown said over his shoulder as he spurred his horse and rode off, followed by his small detachment disguised as Union cavalry.

There was no more time, no more interruptions to delay the *Texas*' voyage to hell. Tombs turned to Craven.

"Lieutenant, escort our *passenger* to my quarters and tell Chief Engineer O'Hare to send a mechanic to remove the manacles. I won't die as commander of a slave ship."

The bearded man smiled at Tombs. "Thank you, Commander. I'm grateful for your kindness."

"Do not thank me," said Tombs grimly. "By sun up we'll all be introducing ourselves to the devil."

Ever so gradually at first, then faster and faster, the *Texas* began to steam downriver, helped along by the 2-knot current. No wind stirred, and except for the throb of the engines, the river ran silent. In the pale light of a quarter moon, she slid across the black water like a wraith, more sensed than seen, almost an illusion.

She seemed to have no substance, no solidity. Only her movement gave her away, revealing a spectral outline gliding past a motionless shore. Designed specifically for one mission, one voyage, her builders had constructed a marvelous machine, the finest fighting machine the Confederates had put afloat during the four years of war.

She was a twin-screw, twin-engined vessel, 190 feet in length, 40 feet of beam, and drawing only 11 feet of water. The sloping 12-foot-high sides of her casemate were angled inward at 30 degrees and covered with 6 inches of iron plate backed by 12 inches of cotton compressed by 20 inches of oak and pine. Her armor continued under the waterline, forming a curled knuckle that extended out from the hull.

The *Texas* carried only four guns, but they had a vicious

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bite. Two 100-pound Blakely rifled guns were mounted fore and aft on pivots that allowed them to be fired in broadside while two 9-inch, 64-pounders covered the port and starboard.

Unlike other ironclads whose machinery had been stripped out of commercial steamers, her engines were big, powerful, and brand new. Her heavy boilers lay below the waterline, and the 9-foot screws could push her hull through calm water at 14 knots, the nautical equivalent of 16 mph—tremendous speed unmatched by any armored ship in both navies.

Tombs was proud of his ship, yet saddened too, knowing that her life might well be short. But he was determined that the two of them would write a fitting epitaph to the closing glory of the Confederate states.

He climbed a ladder from the gun deck and entered the pilothouse, a small structure on the forward section of the casemate that was shaped like a pyramid with the top leveled off. He stared through the eye slits at the darkness and then nodded toward the strangely silent Chief Pilot, Leigh Hunt.

"We'll be under full steam the entire trip to the sea, Mr. Hunt. You'll have to bear a sharp eye to keep us from running aground."

Hunt, a James River pilot who knew every bend and shoal like the creases in his face, kept his eyes focused ahead and tipped his head upward. "What little light comes from the moon is enough for me to read the river."

"Yankee gunners will use it too."

"True, but our gray sides blend with the shadows along the bank. They won't pick us out easily."

"Let us hope so," Tombs sighed.

He climbed through a rear hatch and stood on the casemate roof as the *Texas* reached Drewry's Bluff and surged through the moored gunboats of Admiral Semmes' James River Fleet. The crews of her sister ironclads, *Virginia II*, *Fredericksburg*, and *Richmond*, sick at heart as they prepared to blow their ships into the air, suddenly broke into wild cheering as the *Texas* swept past. Black smoke spewed from her stack and obscured the stars. The Confed-

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erate battle flag stretched out taut in the breeze from the ship's forward thrust, presenting a stirring sight that would never be seen again.

Tombs doffed his hat and held it high. It was the final dream that would soon become a nightmare of bitterness and defeat. And yet, it was a grand moment to be savored. The *Texas* was on her way to becoming a legend.

And then, as suddenly as she appeared, she was gone around the river's bend, her wake the only sign of her passing.

Just above the Trent's Reach, where the Federal army had stretched an obstruction across the river and dug several artillery emplacements, Tombs ordered the United States colors raised on the mast.

Inside the casemate, the gun deck was cleared for action. Most of the men had stripped to the waist and stood at their guns with handkerchiefs tied around their foreheads. The officers had removed their coats and quietly strode the deck in their undershirts beneath suspenders. The ship's surgeon passed out tourniquets and instructed the men on how to apply them.

Fire buckets were spaced about the deck. Sand was spread to soak up blood. Pistols and cutlasses were issued to repel boarders, rifles loaded with bayonets fixed on their muzzles. The hatches to the magazine rooms below the gun deck were opened and the winches and pulleys readied to hoist the shot and powder.

Pushed by the current, the *Texas* was doing 16 knots when her bow crushed the floating spar of the obstruction. She surged through into clear water with hardly a scratch on the iron ram bolted to her bow.

An alert Union sentry spotted the *Texas* as she slipped out of the dark and fired off his musket.

"Cease fire, for God's sake cease fire!" Tombs shouted from the roof of the casemate.

"What ship are you?" a voice from shore came back.

"The *Atlanta*, you idiot. Can't you recognize your own ship?"

"When did you come upriver?"

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"An hour ago. We're under orders to patrol to the obstruction and back to City Point."*

The bluff worked. The Union sentries along the shore appeared satisfied. The *Texas* moved ahead without further incident. Tombs exhaled a deep breath of relief.

He'd fully expected a hail of shot to lash out against his ship. With that danger temporarily passed, his only fear now was that a suspicious enemy officer might telegraph a warning up and down the river.

Fifteen miles beyond the obstruction, Tombs' luck began to run out as a low, menacing mass loomed from the blackness ahead.

The Union dual-turreted monitor, *Onondaga*, 11 inches of armor on her turrets, 5½ inches on her hull, and mounting two powerful 15-inch Dahlgren smoothbores and two 150-pounder Parrott rifles, lay anchored near the western bank, her stern aimed downstream. She was taking on coal from a barge tied to her starboard side.†

The *Texas* was almost on top of her when a midshipman standing on top of the forward turret spotted the Confederate ironclad and gave the alarm.

The crew paused from loading coal and peered at the ironclad that was hurtling out of the night. Commander John Austin of the *Onondaga* hesitated a few moments, doubtful whether a rebel ironclad could have come this far down the James River without being exposed. Those few moments cost him. By the time he shouted for his crew to cast loose their guns, the *Texas* was passing abeam, an easy stone's throw away.

"Heave to!" Austin cried, "or we'll fire and blow you out of the water!"

"We are the *Atlanta*!" Tombs yelled back, carrying out the charade to the bitter end.

Austin was not taken in, not even by the sudden sight of the Union ensign on the mast of the intruder. He gave the order to fire.

*General Grant's Union army supply port on the James River.

†The original *Monitor* was only the first of her class. Almost sixty more were built of varied design as late as 1903.

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The forward turret came into action too late. The *Texas* had already swept past and out of its angle of fire. But the two 15-inch Dahlgrens inside the *Onondaga's* rear turret spat flame and smoke.

At point blank range the Union gunners couldn't miss, and didn't. The shots struck the sides of the *Texas* like sledgehammer blows, smashing in the upper aft end of the casemate in an explosion of iron and wooden splinters that struck down seven men.

At almost the same time, Tombs shouted an order down the open roof hatch. The gun-port shutters dropped aside and the *Texas* poured her three guns broadside into the *Onondaga's* turret. One of the Blakely's 100-pounder shells crashed through an open port and exploded against a Dahlgren, causing a gush of smoke and flame and terrible carnage inside the turret. Nine men were killed and eleven badly wounded.

Before the guns from either vessel could be reloaded, the rebel ironclad had melted back into the night and safely steamed around the next bend in the river. The *Onondaga's* forward turret blindly fired a parting salutation, the shells whistling high and aft of the fleeing *Texas*.

Desperately, Commander Austin drove his crew to up anchor and swing around 180 degrees. It was a futile gesture. The monitor's top speed was barely above 7 knots. There was no hope of her chasing down and closing on the rebel craft.

Calmly, Tombs called to Lieutenant Craven. "Mr. Craven, we'll hide no more under an enemy flag. Please hoist the Confederate colors and close the gun-ports."

A young midshipman eagerly sprang to the mast and untied the halyards, pulling down the stars and stripes and sending up the diagonal stars and bars on a field of white and red.

Craven joined Tombs atop the casemate. "Now the word is out," he said, "it'll be no picnic between here and the sea. We can deal with army shore batteries. None of their field artillery is powerful enough to make more than a dent on our armor."

Tombs paused to stare apprehensively across the bow at

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the black river unwinding ahead. "The guns of the Federal fleet waiting for us at the mouth of the river are our greatest danger."

A barrage burst out from shore almost before he finished speaking.

"And so it begins," Craven waxed philosophically, as he hurriedly retreated to his station on the gun deck below. Tombs remained exposed behind the pilot-house to direct the movement of his ship against any Federal vessels blocking the river.

Shells from unseen batteries and musket fire from sharpshooters began to splatter the *Texas* like a hail storm. While his men cursed and chafed at the bit, Tombs kept the gun-ports closed. He saw no reason to endanger his crew and waste valuable powder and shot at an unseen enemy.

For two more hours the *Texas* endured the onslaught. Her engines ran smoothly and pushed her at speeds a knot or two faster than she had been designed. Wooden gunboats appeared, fired off their broadsides, and then attempted to take up the chase as the *Texas* ignored them like gnats and dashed past as if they were stopped in the water.

Suddenly the familiar outline of the *Atlanta* materialized, anchored broadside-on across the river. Her starboard guns poured forth as their lookouts recognized the unyielding rebel monster bearing down on them.

"She knew we was coming," Tombs muttered.

"Should I pass around her, Captain?" asked Chief Pilot Hunt, displaying a remarkable coolness at the helm.

"No, Mr. Hunt," answered Tombs. "Ram her slightly forward of her stern."

"Smash her to the side out of our way," Hunt replied in understanding. "Very well, sir."

Hunt gave the wheel a quarter turn and aimed the *Texas*' bow straight toward the stern of the *Atlanta*. Two bolts from the ex-Confederate's 8-inch guns drove into the rapidly approaching casemate, cracking the shield and pushing the wooden backing in almost a foot and wounding three men by the concussion and splinters.

The gap quickly closed and the *Texas* buried 10 feet of her