



## *An episode of the Trent Affair*

*by Virginia Mason*

James Murray Mason was born on November 3, 1798, in Fairfax County, Virginia. A secessionist, Mason was a Virginia delegate to the provisional Confederate Congress. His term of service in the Confederate Congress was very short, for on August 29th, he was appointed by the President to be “Special Commissioner of the Confederate States of America, near the Government of Her Majesty, the Queen of Great Britain and Ireland”.

“It was thought important he should be in London at as early a day as possible, so he lost no time in arranging his affairs for his absence and on September 25th reported in Richmond ready to sail. In taking leave of his family, he gave them but few directions, said he relied confidently upon Mrs. Mason's discretion to guide her and her daughters in any emergency that might arise; and felt fully assured they would be well and kindly cared for by his friends in Richmond, as well as by those in Winchester. He expressed the wish that the family silver should be given into the public treasury, to be melted into coin, if there should ever be need for it and urged, as his last request, that his wife and daughters would never allow themselves to be within the enemies lines, but would make whatever sacrifices might be required to enable them to go, if necessary, from place to place until they reached the last village in the Confederacy. When urged to take with him one of his daughters, whose companionship, and whose assistance as an amanuensis was thought to be indispensable to his comfort, he said nothing could induce him to incur for his wife or daughters any possible risk of capture. “Moreover”,

said he, "the boys need their mother near them in case they should be wounded, and turning to his daughters he added, "You, girls, will be of more value to me if you are with your mother to aid, to cheer and to comfort her, than you could possibly be in any other way, no matter how great a pleasure your presence with me could ever prove". For his own safety he had no fear, nor had he any apprehensions or doubts as to the triumphant success of the Confederate Government in establishing and maintaining its independence. This confident assurance is evinced in all his letters and dispatches. Extracts from them tell the story of the next four years.

"CHARLESTON, S. C., October 9th, 1861.

"My Very Dear Wife: I expect to dispatch this to-morrow as my last missive before going. The hope now is of getting off to-morrow night under a plan of increased safety the *Nashville* is abandoned because of the difficulty of getting out, arising from the draft of water incident to her size. She will go, how ever, on account of the Government and take the risk, probably tonight. We have, by authority of the Government chartered a smaller, but very safe steamer, called the *Gordon*, to take us either to Nassau (an island of the Bahamas off the coast of Florida), or to Havana, at our option. There is no risk of our being seen by the enemy as we go out, as we can run close to shore, and her speed is our security at sea. She can reach Havana in 70 hours, and then we go by the regular line of British steamers, the largest class of packets. I think thus, after much delay, we are on the right track but nothing is to be said of all this, until you hear that we are off, as you shall do by earliest telegram".

"FRIDAY, October 11th, 1861.

There has intervened the usual delay in getting a steamer ready, but now writing to you at 5 o'clock p. m., we are assured that we shall be off to-night as soon as the moon goes down at midnight, and we have made all preparations accordingly. Our boat is a strong "Line Steamer" well known in these waters as the fastest afloat, and we have chartered her, by authority of the Government at \$10,000 to place us in Havana; so you see how valuable we are considered. Mr. Slidell's family and Mrs. Eustis accompany us, still I am satisfied that I did not take either of the girls, although, probably no real risk, I could not dismiss apprehensions. Trescott will telegraph you of our safe departure through the State Department. I am perfectly well and leave the country in high hope and buoyant. Again, my dear wife, invoking the care and blessing of Heaven on you and our dear children, "I am, as ever, most affectionately yours,

"J. M. MASON".

"AT SEA, OFF THE SOUTHERN END OF THE ISLAND OF ABAGO. (ONE OF THE BAHAMAS), October 14th, 1861.

"Here we are, my dear wife, on the deep blue sea clear of all the Yankees. We ran the blockade in splendid style on Saturday morning at 1 a. m. a dark, rainy night such as the enemy thought no sinner would be abroad in, passed within sight of the lights of the blockading squadron, but I presume without being observed by them, as we made no noise that we were aware of; we had a light, rapid steamer and she went by under press

of steam. So it was, we got clear, and now, having run about 600 miles, are within four hours of Nassau (island of New Providence, Bahama), a British possession, which will be our first stopping place the steamer being under our control for the voyage. (You will see the Bahama group on the map immediately off the coast of Florida.) We stop at Nassau to learn about the English line of steamers, and where we had better join the next packet thence to Havana, which is not more than 12 hours run, and where (stopping a few hours at Nassau) we expect to be on Wednesday, the 16th. Could we have ordered everything it could not have been more propitious first, in the dark, rainy night to get out and since in the finest, calmest weather, our little egg-shell of a bark delights in. The first day out we had a spirited breeze, since then, the sea has been as calm and smooth as a lake, and yet so continues. The long heavy swell, however, which belongs to old ocean, made everybody on board sick, even including Slidell, but myself. I have never felt the slightest qualm, but had a good appetite and a clear head all the time. We have with us Mrs. Slidell and three daughters and son, aged 15, and Mrs. Eustis. The ladies did not appear for 24 hours and hardly yet have their feet under them. The sun is rather hot in these latitudes, but even in the absence of a breeze, the rapid motion of the boat gives us a fine and cool air. We shall take the first English steamer we can find for England, but we may have to wait for some days in Cuba for her departure. Should this detention occur, we shall go out into the country to avoid risk of sickness in Havana, although, it is said that at this season the place is healthy. But having run the blockade successfully everything else is plain sailing, because under any foreign flag we are safe from molestation. Mr. Trescott promised to send you a telegram through the Department of State, and to write you by mail of Sunday if we got safely out, so that I am flattering myself you and our dear circle have heard, long ere this of our success. You must tell me in your next letter when you heard of our departure and what? I am curious to know how far those we left on shore could judge of our safety we had no one to send back. I write this to keep you au-courant of our movements across the ocean, and I shall finish it at Havana to go back by the steamer, lately the *Gordon*, now, the *Theodora*. To confuse the enemy, they change names here with little scruple.

“WEDNESDAY, October 16th, off the coast of Cuba.

“We stopped at Nassau on Monday afternoon and found no steamer running thence except to New York made the coast of Cuba at 10 a. m. this morning, and soon fell in with a small Spanish steamer of war, whom we boarded and there learned that we were just too late for the English steamer, and should have to wait there three weeks.

“We shall land at a small town, called Cardenas, about 100 miles down the coast from Havana, and to avoid risk of fever shall go into the high and cool lands. At any rate, we are safe from the Yankees and henceforth under a foreign flag.

I have penciled this to go back by the *Theodora*, the nom de guerre of the *Gordon*. It will assure you and our dear children of my safety and will bear to you the love and affection of, my dear wife.

Yours ever,

“T. M. MASON”.

To be continued ...