

Partners of the Tide

JOSEPH C. LINCOLN
Author of "Cap'n Ez"

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There was to be what the posters called "a grand select subscription ball" at the Orham town hall on the evening of Oct. 10. Gus had expressed a desire to go to the ball, and Bradley had subscribed—that is to say, he had paid \$2 for a ticket admitting "gent and two ladies."

He dressed for the affair when the evening came with no very pleasant anticipations. The relations between Gus and himself had not improved since the disagreement over Sam's visit.

The partners were expecting a check from New Bedford in payment of the first shipment of tar, and as it was early when Bradley finished dressing, he determined to go down to the post-office before calling for Gus. Captain Titcomb was out of town. He had not told where he was going, merely observing that he wanted a couple of days off for private business. What the private business was he did not state.

The expected check did not arrive on that night, and as Bradley came down the postoffice steps some one laid a heavy hand on his shoulder. He turned with a start.

"Why, hello, Cap'n Ez!" he exclaimed. "You back again?"

The captain hooked his arm into that of his companion and led the way through the crowd of loungers on the sidewalk. Bradley protested.

"Cap'n Ez, wait till some other time. I must—"

"Shut up! I'm so full of steam I'll be over in a minute. This ain't foolin'; it's business."

He dragged his puzzled partner along the sidewalk and across the road to the Traveler's Rest. Then he led the way upstairs and into his own room.

"Now, Brad," he said, "you know mighty well I've got something important to say or I wouldn't have snaked you up by the coat collar this way. But never mind that. If you ain't interested enough to—"

"You know I'm interested, Cap'n Ez. Only do hurry!"

The captain locked the door again. Then he took a bundle of papers from his overcoat pocket and, selecting a card from among them, said impressively, "Brad, what have you and me been praisin' for for the last three months or more?"

"I don't know," he replied. "Do you mean a big job?"

"I mean somethin' that'll give us the tools to do a good many big jobs with. I mean a new, up to date wreckin' vessel."

"Brad, my son," he said slowly, "I've got that very craft."

"You've got her?"

He tossed the card on the table, and Bradley picked it up. It was the photograph of a good sized, two-masted schooner—a wrecking schooner, and of modern build; so much was plain.

"Look at her!" cried the captain. "Ain't she a dream? And that tincture don't begin to do her justice. Now, Brad, that schooner's the Diving Belle, built in New Bedford two years ago and cost eight thousand to build. No sham about her; built for wreckin'; good seasoned timber, tackles, patent windlass, light, roomy cabin, anchors, sails, all complete—and a first class sixteen horsepower gasoline engine. And, son," Captain Titcomb raised his fist, "you and me can buy the whole blessed outfit for \$5,000 cash!"

The fist fell on the table with a bang. Bradley gasped in delighted wonder.

When Captain Titcomb really enthused over a subject he was a wonderful talker. Now, shaking a forefinger in his companion's face, he talked so fast that Bradley forgot everything except to listen.

The schooner had been built for one Abijah Foster of Vineyard Haven. She had been engaged in the wrecking business for two seasons along the south Jersey coast, and then her owner died. His widow was the only heir, and she needed money. The vessel had been bought by a Nantucket man, but when it came to paying the price there had been a hitch that resulted in the collapse of the deal.

Bradley was now as wildly jubilant as his partner. He asked innumerable questions, but the captain had an answer ready for each one. He had with him a rough plan of the schooner's rig; a photograph of her cabin, a drawing of her engine. These were laid on the table, and they moved from one to the other, the captain explaining, praising and arguing. The passing of time was forgotten entirely.

The junior partner awoke from his trance with a start. And just then, in the sitting room below, the cuckoo clock struck 9.

Bradley turned white and then red. Nine o'clock! And the grand march at the subscription ball was to start "promptly at 8!" And Gus had looked forward to this evening for over a month!

It is doubtful if, even now, he could tell much about his trip from the captain's room to the Baker cottage. He was most of the way. Over and over again he reproached himself for his forgetfulness. Gus had called him

neglectful and selfish once before. What would she say now? He scarcely dared knock on the dining room door.

But whatever he may have expected to hear when that door opened, what he did hear was certainly a distinct surprise. Grandmother Baker, her head enveloped in a shawl, peeped out and said:

"Gus said if you called to say that she didn't wish to interfere with anything so important as your business matters. You see, Sam Hammond stopped here about half past eight and said he'd seen you and Cap'n Ez go into the Traveler's Rest together. So Gus went to the hall with him."

The subscription ball was nearly half over when Bradley came up the stairs of the town hall. He tossed his ticket in at the window and absently checked his overcoat and hat. Then he stood in the doorway looking at the dancers. For almost an hour he had been walking up and down the sidewalk opposite the hall, remorsefully hating himself one minute and fiercely nursing his injured pride the next. Twice he turned to go home, and each time he turned back again.

The waltz quadrille was the particular dance then going on. Bradley glanced over the crowded floor. He caught sight of Sam Hammond dancing with one of the Rogers girls. Opposite them in the set, he noted vaguely, were Captain Titcomb and Clara Hopkins.

He spoke with Captain Titcomb but once. That was during an interval between dances, when the captain, redhot but smiling, came strolling toward him.

"Hello, Brad!" he exclaimed. "Got here, didn't you?" Then, glancing at the young man's face, he added: "Havin' a good time? Hope our stoppin' to talk didn't make any difference?"

The answer was noncommittal. The subscription ball, extras and all, came to an end at 3 o'clock. By this time Bradley was once more repentant and humble. When Gus came out of the cloakroom he went to meet her, resolved to abase himself and plead for forgiveness.

"Gus," he stammered, "Gus—I—I—mayn't I walk home with you? You know I?"

But as Bradley's anger had cooled, his fiancée had arisen.

"Thank you," she answered, and every word was crusted with ice. "Mr. Hammond was gentleman enough to escort me here, and I presume he will see me home."

Bradley accompanied Miss Rogers to the parental gate. It wasn't a hilarious walk. The young lady said to her older sister later on:

"Julia, I honestly believe he didn't speak one word from the time he left the hall till he said good night. I had to talk for two, or I should have gone to sleep on the way. He may be good looking enough, but Gus Baker can have him for all me. I'd as soon come home with a wooden Indian."

And Bradley, in his own chamber, stared out of the window at the light in Gus' room and vowed that he would not get down on his knees to that young lady again; let her have her New York gentleman if she wanted him. Then he thought of that other dance and how happy he had been because she had given him the waltz that Sam asked for. And he went to bed utterly miserable.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE next morning he was more miserable still, having had time to think it over. But he resolved that no one should guess his feelings from his appearance. Therefore he was, at the breakfast table, outwardly calm, although a little more quiet than usual.

Bradley had little appetite. He drank his coffee, and then, with an excuse that he was in a hurry, left the table and, putting on his cap, went out.

He was, to all appearances, in high spirits when he reached the wharf. He dreaded meeting Captain Titcomb and Hammond, but he made up his mind they shouldn't know it. So he chatted with Barney and Peleg, laughed loudly at the funniest jokes and whistled as he stood at the Lizzie's wheel and steered her out of the harbor.

They worked at getting out the tar until 3 o'clock, when, at Captain Titcomb's suggestion, they quit for the day, and the Lizzie came back to her moorings. Then the crew went ashore, and the partners shut themselves in the cabin to once more discuss the project of buying the Diving Belle.

The photographs and sketches were exhibited, the captain argued, and insisted, and Bradley did his best to forget Gus and to be interested. He succeeded partially.

The junior partner agreed that the Vineyard Haven schooner was a wonderful bargain, but he disliked the idea of going in debt for a part of her, as it seemed that they must do.

"You see, Cap'n Ez," he said, "we've got altogether less than \$4,000 between us if we put up every cent we've made. We shall have to borrow at least another thousand, and I hate to. In a year, if things go as well as they have, we ought to be able to build a new vessel and pay for every stick of her. And yet," he added, "it seems a shame to let this chance go by."

The captain glanced at his companion and drummed with his fingers on the table. When he spoke there was a hesitancy in his manner.

"We can't let it go by," he said. "We'd never get another like it. Now, Brad—now, Brad—" He stopped and drummed again. Then he went on without looking up. "I don't know I mentioned this afore, but all my money ain't been put into this wreckin' deal yet. You see, I own some shares in that big cranberry bog of the Ostabek folks. Must be about \$1,500 worth altogether. I calculate maybe I ain't spoke of this to you afore, have I?"

"Well, no, you haven't," answered the astonished Bradley dryly.

"No. I presume likely it—er—must have slipped my mind. Well, I'll sell the bog shares and put up what's needed to finish buyin' the Diving Belle. You can pay off your part as we earn it. Is it a go?"

"All right," Bradley said finally. "I'll agree, of course. If you're willing to risk it, I ought to be."

"Good! We'll take a day off tomorrow and go up to the Haven and look her over."

The partners started for Vineyard Haven in the early morning. The captain talked most of the way, for which Bradley was thankful. He didn't feel like talking. They found the Diving Belle lying at the wharf, and Captain Titcomb watched his companion's face as they stood on the stringpiece looking down at her.

They bought the schooner. It remained only to bring over the check and take away the schooner, and this they did a week later. Meanwhile Captain Titcomb had performed another miracle. He had hunted up a man who had expressed a desire to purchase the Lizzie and after two days of bargaining, during which time the captain had twice pretended to give it up and return to Orham, had sold him the old schooner for \$750; also he sold his shares in the cranberry bog.

There was a good sized crowd of townspeople on the Orham wharf when the Diving Belle slid smoothly past the harbor mouth and up to her moorings. There was a splendid breeze, but they couldn't have used the sails for any consideration. The sight of the moving pistons in that wonderful sixteen horsepower engine, the enchanting hum of the gasoline, the muffled drumming of the propeller under the stern—these were brand new, undisturbed joys of proprietorship that no mere item like the saving of unnecessary expense could induce them to forfeit.

Captain Ezra put in the most of his spare time "improving" the new purchase. Bradley told him it seemed like the Thomas Doane days to smell paint and trim over a bucket of water and a swab every little while.

Orham was just then in the throes of a burglar scare. Two houses in the village had been broken into, and the natives were talking of calling an indignation meeting for the purpose of expressing their opinion of the selectmen. Then a steam yacht belonging to a summer resident, which lay housed over for winter in the harbor, was boarded and ransacked.

It was on the day following this robbery that Captain Titcomb began tinkering with the cabin door. This door and the sliding hatch above it had been fastened with a padlock. The captain's first move was to block the hatch so that it would slide back but a little way. Then he sawed and hammered away at the door.

"There!" he cried in triumph after two hours of hard work. "Brad, come here! S'pose one of them mean sneaky thieves tries to bust into that cabin. He can pry the staple off that padlock easy, can't he? Yes, but the way that hatch is now 'twon't open fur enough for him to climb down; he's got to open that door. And that door's got on it a three dollar patent lock that can't be opened without the key, and no ten-cent whistle down the barrel key either. The key that'll open that has lace edgin' on it. You hear me! And I've took off the knob on the inside of the lock so it can't be worked that way. Now, when we want to go home we haul to the hatch and lock it with the padlock. Then we jest slam the door. Click! There you are! A spring lock. How's that for high? Thunderation! I've left the key inside!"

Luckily the key was lying on the top step of the cabin stairs, and they were able to reach it with a fishhook on the end of a stick.

Getting up the tar with the aid of the patent windlass and the engine was simply fun. They took out all they could bring up through the hatchway and then began blowing out the side of the hull with dynamite. The explosive was stored in the Diving Belle's hold forward behind a bulkhead with only one small manhole in it and was carefully boxed in to prevent accident.

Bradley's whole interest in life now centered in his work. Gus had not spoken with since the night of the dance; had, in fact, only seen her at a distance. Sam, while on board the schooner, was pleasant and, to all appearances, as friendly as Bradley would let him be, but from Captain Jabez and from other considerate and gossip loving souls the junior partner learned that Hammond was now a regular caller at the Baker cottage.

CHAPTER XV.

NOVEMBER had been a month of exceptionally pleasant weather, but in the night of Nov. 1 Bradley woke to feel the old house trembling and to hear the rain thundering on the roof overhead and rattling against the windows.

While he was dressing he heard voices in the road below and, opening the window, saw Jim Rogers, the fish peddler, sitting in his wagon with the rain sluicing from the peak of his son's wetter and carrying on a shouted conversation with Mrs. Baker.

"What did you say 'twas, Mr. Rogers?" screamed the old lady, speaking through the closed blinds of her chamber window.

"The Freedom—big six masted coal barge. She's high and dry on the Razorback. Hawser parted. The tug's tryin' to get her off now, but Cap'n Knowles telephoned Sam Hardy that 'twan't to use."

Bradley didn't hear the last part of the conversation. He struggled into his clothes, and then, putting on his oilskins, ran out of the house and down the road.

Bradley's objective point was the postoffice. He wanted to see Hardy and learn the particulars, but Captain Titcomb was there before him. They met at the door. The captain's eyes were shining.

"Come on, Brad!" he said. "I was jest 'goin' to send for you. I know all about it!"

He told the story as they walked to the wharf in the pouring rain. It was as Rogers had said. The great barge, twin sister of the Liberty, was on her way from Boston to New York under tow. The storm had come up unexpectedly, and the hawser had parted. Now she was fast on the Razorback shoal.

"Crimester!" exclaimed the captain. "Won't she be a job! Brad, if you and me could only have the chance!"

Alvin Bearse, who boarded nowadays at the house of a relative in Orham, was already on board the Diving Belle when the partners reached her.

"She's hard and fast for sure," muttered Captain Titcomb when they reached the hulk. "Five thousand tons of coal inside of her and this notheater drivin' her farther on every minute. I swan to man, Brad, she's there for awhile. No tug nor three tugs, fur's that goes—can haul her off. Member what I said when the Liberty come so near landin' where she is? It's an anchor and cable job, and we can do that as well as anybody, and cheaper than the big fellers. If they'll only let us try! By crimester, they've got to!"

That evening the train brought representatives of three large wrecking companies to Orham. The younger Mr. Cook came also. The partners saw him, but he would give them no satisfaction. "You must come to Boston tomorrow if you want to bid," he said. "But I tell you frankly, price isn't the only thing—we must be satisfied that the job can be carried through." It was evident that he didn't believe they could handle it.

But Bradley and the captain were certain they could handle it if the chance was given them. Seventy men, at least, would be needed, and to house and feed them was the problem. The Boston Salvage company had lighters and barges for this purpose and they had not. But there was the big shanty at the Point, the one in which the picnic had been held before. By building new bunk and slinging hammocks twice that number at least could find room. The rest must occupy other shanties or come up to Orham at night. The partners schemed and figured until nearly 4 o'clock in the morning.

One of them must go to Boston that day. The captain said Bradley ought to go because Cook knew him, but the junior partner didn't agree.

"You go, Cap'n Ez," he said, with decision. "You're a better bargainer than I am, and I'll take a good talker and a clever trader to land this job in the face of the competition. Go, and good luck be with you!"

So the captain went on the first train. He promised to telegraph as soon as a decision was reached.

But no telegram came that day. All the next forenoon Bradley hung about the station waiting. The noon train arrived; no captain, and still no word. He determined to wait until the evening train arrived, and then, if the captain didn't come, to telegraph. But the first man off the train was Captain Titcomb.

"Didn't get it, hey?" asked Bradley. "Oh, I got it! Yes, I got it! Now, don't ask any more questions here. Come on down to my room."

He was silent all the way to the Traveler's Rest and, for a man who had just secured the greatest contract of his business life, seemed strangely downcast. When they reached the room he locked the door and threw his overcoat and hat on the sofa.

"Well," he said slowly, "I made Boston all right and stood for Cook & Sons under full canvas. I hailed the young squirt with the hay on his upper lip and asked him if the old man was in."

"What do you want to see him for?" says he. "So says he. I you trot along like a good little boy and tell the old man that the feller that's goin' to git the Freedom off Orham shoal is out here." That kind of fetched him over with a start, and he went in and told Cook. In a minute out he comes and pilots me into the skipper's state-room.

"I callate Cook was expectin' to see another feller. 'Are you from the Salvage company?' says he. 'No,' says I, 'I'm a chair; my name's Titcomb. I'm from Orham. My partner's a young feller named Nickerson. He's the one you picked out to lift the Liberty's anchor that time.' Well, that way of puttin' it made him laugh, and he told me to go ahead and spin my yarn, only be quick. I spun it, but I ain't sartin that I was quick. I never talked so afore in my life, though I've beat it once sence. When I have another chance he says, 'Cap'n, there's nothin' the matter with your nerve, is there?' I told him no, I hadn't had to take physick for it. 'Well,' says he, 'I'd like to give you the job, but you ain't big enough. This ain't anchor draggin'."

"Then I got after him again, told him about the new schooner, drew a diagram of the shoal and made it plain jest how she'd got to be got off 'twas done at all and that we could do it as well as anybody else in the world and a whole lot cheaper. At last he told me to come in and see him again late that afternoon."

"I was round on time, you bet! The hay lip chap told me the old man had gone for the day, but that he'd left word that 'twas no use; our firm wan't big enough for the job. Says I to hay lip, 'Where's the old man live?' He didn't know, hein' a good liar. I asked him in an interested sort of way if he was dead sure where he lived."

Bradley's face fell. "Of course that settled it," he said. "You couldn't accept such an idiotic offer as that."

Captain Ezra took his cigar from his mouth. "Well, Brad," he answered soberly, "that's what I did; I accepted it."

"Now, Cap'n Ez, look here! You and I have put almost our last copper into the new schooner. We've got practically no ready money. We must hire from seventy to a hundred men at \$3 a day and pay them every week. We must feed 'em. We must spend money fitting up the shanty to lodge 'em in. I'll take, maybe, a month before we get her clear—if we do clear her. We may have to spend five or six thousand before then. Where's the money coming from?"

"Are you out of your head? We've been lucky so far and haven't had a failure. But failures are bound to come. Suppose we work on this barge for a month and then a heavy gale strikes?"

"But, Brad, think of what it means to us if we make good."

"Cap'n Ez, we got that job because nobody else would take it that way. We can do it if anybody can, but nobody else would be fool enough to gamble against the Lord Almighty's weather. We'd be called fools from here to Provincetown."

The captain drew a long breath. "All right," he said gloomily. "Maybe you're right, Brad. It is a crazy game, I s'pose, and I was afraid you'd see it that way. Only you must make up your mind to this—if we give up this chance we must settle back and be nothin' but anchor draggers the rest of our lives. We've fumbled once, and no matter how good the reason is, no more big jobs'll come our way. But if we make good—when?"

Now it was Bradley's turn to hesitate. There was some sense in what his partner said, but it was playing against odds and with the last dollar on the table.

Suddenly Bradley spoke. "Oh, hang it, what's the odds?" he exclaimed recklessly. "Go ahead, cap'n! I'll sink or swim with you!"

Captain Ezra grasped his hand. "I swore you would," he cried. "Son, this job's goin' to make us!"

Bradley's laugh was short and rather bitter.

"Yes," he said, "make—or break."

himself and went out to paw over the directory. Inside of an hour I was on an electric car bound for Brookline and Cook's home.

"Pretty soon down comes Cook in a swallerthill coat. He looked mad. 'Is it you?' he says. 'Didn't you git my message?' I told him I'd got it, but that 'twon't be fair to him to let that end H. Pretty soon young Cook come in, and he listened too."

"Finally the old man says, 'Well, Titcomb, what's your sigger?' I told him what you and me had agreed on. He seemed surprised, I thought. Then he and his son went into the next room and talked. When they come back he says, 'Titcomb, you've got the perseverance of the devil or that partner of yours. Put you in good company, hey, Brad? Your price, I don't mind tellin' you, he goes on, 'is lower than any one else has given. If you were a bigger concern I guess I'd give the job to you. Anyway, you come in and see me tomorrow.'"

"Well, this mornin' I was at his office when the doors opened. And there I set until after 2 this afternoon. A feller from the Salvage company come in while I was there, and so did one from the South Boston tug people. They went into Cook's room and come out again. Finally the old man sent for me. He and his son were there together. 'Titcomb,' says he, 'I'm a feller, and I know it, but I'm goin' to let you try to git the Freedom clear. That wan't all he said. He went on to

figure there was sugar enough in it to drop a lump in friend Obed's teacup providin' he stirred up their spoon. Well, good night, or good mornin', rather. It's double or quits with us this time, son, for sartin, but if Titcomb & Nickerson do go under it'll be with colors flyin'."

Within the week Sateckit Point, from a lonely, gull haunted sand pit, inhabited only by the life saving crew and the lighthouse keeper and his family, became a small town, the population of which left each morning for the Razorback shoal and returned at night to eat and sleep in the big shanty and those surrounding it.

Captain Titcomb saw the people at the Wellmouth bank and placed a mortgage on the Diving Belle. As the partners owned her free and clear, he was able to get her cost price, \$5,000.

Placards announcing that men were wanted at once and at \$3 a day and board were hung in the postoffices and railway stations in Orham, South Orham, West Harniss, Harniss Center, Wellmouth and other towns; also an advertisement appeared in the Item. The response was immediate. Work at good wages was scarce in the winter months, and men came from twenty miles away to obtain it.

The Diving Belle carried them down to the Point. There, under Barney Small's supervision, some set to work building extra bunks in the big shanty, slinging hammocks, putting up stores—the partners bought five secondhand ranges—and making three neighboring abandoned fishing huts inhabitable. The rest worked over the stranded coal barge, getting out the anchors, stripping her of all unnecessary ironwork and rigging and preparing to bring the coal from her hold and dump it overboard.

Seventy men were hired altogether, and to feed them it was necessary to buy large quantities of provisions. Captain Titcomb managed this part of the business, and the bargains he made with Caleb Weeks and other storekeepers were wonderful and in some cases not too profitable for the sellers. As Mr. Weeks said: "Ez Titcomb spent half the forenoon with me today, and afore he got through talkin' he'd tangled me up so with figgers that I don't know whether I sold him salt at a cent a pound or cornmeal at a dollar a barrel. I'll have to put in the rest of the day callin' him and addin' up, so's to know whether I've made money or lost it."

Soon the work on the Freedom was in full swing, and the great hull hummed like a beehive. Men were standing by the hatches and by the derricks. Men were working by the rail transferring ropes and ironwork to the Diving Belle. Down in the hold gangs of men with faces sooty black except where the sweat streaked them with pallid channels were shoveling the coal into the big iron buckets that the creaking derricks lifted and swung over the side. The donkey engines puffed and whistled, the chains rattled, and ton after ton of good hard coal roared from the opening buckets and splashed into the tumbling waves of the channel.

The captain and Bradley, together for a moment, stood in the bows, where the heavy cable led, taut and rigid, from the windlass out to the submerged anchors. The Freedom had moved slightly in the last few days, and the partners were encouraged.

"By crimester, Brad," exclaimed Captain Titcomb, pointing, with a grin on his grimy face, to the stout little Diving Belle just then shooting off to the Point with a load of strippings from the Freedom, "that's the little critter that has made it possible for us to handle this job. I don't know what we'd 'a done if we hadn't had her. See her go, will you? Flies round like a flea in a fryin' pan, don't she? You never put your money into anything better for the size than her, and don't you let that fact slip your memory!"

The new schooner had proved her worth twice over. Equipped, as she was, with the engine, she performed the part of a steam launch, a tug and a ferryboat. She had carried out and dropped the anchors in the channel; she took her owners and a few of the hands to and from Orham every night and morning; she was always ready and always useful. In fact, as the captain said, they could scarcely have handled the job without her.

Bradley, dirty and bareheaded, looked at the little vessel.

"I shan't feel easy until we pay off that mortgage," he said. "And, another thing, you mustn't forget to see Obed and close that insurance deal. It worries me to think she is not protected at all."

"That's so. Fact is, I've been so everlastin' busy lately that I'd forgot to eat if I hadn't got in the habit of it. But I must settle that right off. The only thing that's kept it from gainin' through afore is on account of that dynamite in the hold. The papers are ready, Obed won't dicker until we take that stuff off; his company won't insure against explosives."

A little of the dynamite that they had been using in blowing up the hulk containing the tar was still stored in the Diving Belle's hold. Captain Titcomb had promised to see that it was taken ashore, but he always forgot it. Bradley would himself have attended to the matter, but the captain seemed to take the offer as a personal reflection on his own management. It was the same with the insurance. Anything that the captain undertook to do he hated to give up to another.

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