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Chased by a Big Spanish Man O' War

The sea was like green satin, and at intervals the scud of the flying fish made bead-like traceries upon this oily, sheeny surface. Northward raised the tall blue mountains of eastern Cuba. The waters and the fair land composed one vast silence, and the seven correspondents under the awning at the stern of the newspaper dispatch boat spoke of their tobacco famine as if it were the central fact in the universe. The tropic sun smote outlying parts of the ship until they scarred the careless hand. Thank heaven, there was still ice and Apollinaris! The attire of the men was mainly pajamas, and sometimes it was less. Forward grimy and dripping stokers emerged frequently from a hatch and soused themselves with buckets of sea water. The bow of the boat steadily clove the flat sea and two curling waves wrinkled astern. It was about 1 o'clock in the afternoon.

The captain came aft and casually remarked, "Gentlemen, there is the smoke of a steamer close inshore." There was a general separation of correspondents from newspapers, novels and Apollinaris bottles. "Eh, what? A steamer? Where? Let's have a look. Lend me your glasses, Jim." Sure enough there floated against the deep-toned hills a trail of tawney smoke. "Yes, there he is. That's one of them little Spanish gunboats. How is he heading, skipper?"

"He's heading straight for us," said the skipper at last. Well, what was to be done? There was a remote chance that it was an American cruiser prowling to and fro before Santiago de Cuba, but—at any rate, let's wait until we see it.

The captain climbed with his glasses to the top of the wheel-house. "He's heading straight for us and he's smoking up to beat hell." The jocular-stage arrived.

"If he's a Spaniard, don't let a drop of whiskey fall into the enemy's hands."

"Wait until they get to stirring you up with a machete. Then you won't sleep so late in the mornings."

"Let's answer their hail in Chinese and say we are a junk loaded with tea."

Meanwhile the captain shinned down from the top of the pilot-house. "Two masts, two funnels and smoking up to beat hell!"

A busy stage succeeded the jocular stage. "Now, what American cruiser could that be? It isn't the *Marblehead* nor the *Montgomery*, because I know where they are."

"It isn't the *Nashville*, because her stacks are almost as high as her masts."

"It isn't the *Detroit* either. I know about where she is."

"It's a Spaniard!"

"It's a Spaniard!"

The stranger had lifted rapidly from behind the shoulder of the sea and disclosed her two masts and her two funnels even to the people on the deck of the dispatch-boat. "Better hook her up, chief," said the captain. The boat turned her helm due south and the wake crumpled out into large and tumultuous waves.

A stern chase! Shades of Marryat and Cooper! And hail to the proverb asserting that the same is academically bound to endure a respectable prolongation.

“Got her hooked up, chief?”

“Hooked up! Well, I guess so! She’s turning over about as fast as she ever did in her life.”

Now, despite the fact that the dispatch-boat was incapable under the circumstances of doing more than eleven knots, this chase was dramatic and fine. Over the great prairie of smooth water swept the little journalistic adventurer, and eight miles away sped her pursuer, with great clouds of dark smoke rolling from both funnels and tumbling in torn clouds close to the water and far astern. Spanish prisons and the practice of garotting! The absence of a British flag in the locker and the probability that the enemy would not believe it anyhow! A proclamation that newspaper men will be treated as spies and a boat going only eleven knots!

Seven idle men fixed their eyes astern and speculated rapidly, while in the stoke-room a devoted band, herculean for the time, at a bunker of coal—rampant, blind with the sweat that pours from the hair and the forehead into the eye cavities, cursing over a field that ranges from lichens to flying machines, bare to the belt, feet on hot iron plates, faces bloody with color from the glaring furnaces—they stoked, stoked themselves into the air, stoked themselves beneath the sea, stoked themselves into immortality, a fireless rest in a cool hereafter.

“Does she seem to be gaining?”

“Oh, yes, she’s gaining.”

“Can you hook her up any more, chief?”

“Hell! We are away over our limit now. We’ve got the safety valve weighted. If we do any more we’ll blow up. We’re carrying more pounds of steam than this packet ever saw before.”

Well, give the boat a treat, man! Let her see more pounds of steam than she sees even now, when she sees more than she has ever seen before. Surprise and delight her with new wonders. Exhibit to her marvels. Blow her up, if need be, blow her up. Blow her into rat’s-nest fragments. Blow her into a semblance of the output of a compound, eleven-story, triple-tooth coffee-grinder.

And Jamaica! Oh, happy isle, dream-haven, heart’s ease, asylum, refuge, sanctuary, peace-place, resting spot, vast chamber of safety, paradise of the pursued, you are popular. Jamaica, however, was reported on the 29th of May to be 160 miles to the southward of a certain newspaper dispatch-boat.

“He’s smoking up to beat hell,” said the captain.

“He’s gaining,” said one correspondent.

“No; he isn’t,” said another.

“He is,” said another.

“I’ll pass a cable under the ship and tie the valve with that,” said the chief engineer.

“He’s gaining,” said everybody.

“--- ----” !!! said the stoke-room.

The enemy was swelling out. He now exhibited a tremendous beam, and his spars could be counted without a glass. And still he grew. He was fairly flying. Billows of smoke were rolling out of his funnels, and a white shine at his forefoot told where his bow cut the sea.

Only four miles away! The game was up. He could fire and strike now whenever he liked. The dispatch-boat fled still, but hope was gone. The warship simply ate the distance between them. The correspondents began mournful preparations for capture. How many dagoes

did they have up in Atlanta? Were there enough to go around in case an exchange was arranged? Well! well! this was a queer end to the cruise.

On swept the pursuing steamer—inexorable, certain as a natural law. She had fired no gun. She was a terrible water sphinx in her silence. Presently her wheel swung her to starboard, and to the eyes of the speechless and immovable crowd on the dispatch boat was presented the whole beautiful length of the American auxiliary cruiser *St. Paul*.