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With The Blockade on Cuban Coast

(ON BOARD *World TUG Three Friends* OFF THE COAST OF CUBA, May 6, VIA TAMPA, May 8.)

A day on the Cuban blockade.

The coast of Cuba, a high, wooded bank, with ranges of hills in the background, lay ten miles to the south. The flagship *New York* lifted her huge slate-colored body moodily over the quiet waves, disclosing from time to time a bit of blood-red hull below the waterline. Some officers in various degrees of white duck were grouped on the quarterdeck and on the after bridge. The signal men were sending aloft a line of flags, holding talk with a faint gray thing far away, the only other ship on the sweeping expanse of sea.

To those who imagine the blockade of Cuba to be a close assembling of ships about the mouth of Havana harbor this would be confusing. It does not represent the popular idea of the blockade; but, nevertheless, on six days out of eight and twenty-two hours out of twenty-four this is the appearance of the Cuban blockade.

To the eastward another steamer lifted a vague shadow over the horizon and an officer instantly remarked that it was the torpedo boat *Porter*, although how he could identify this vacillating uncertain form is known only to seamen.

In a short time the *Porter*, rolling and tumbling in a sea that scarcely moved the *New York*, glided into the lee of the flagship. As she reeled from side to side her deck twirled as if it was spinning on an axle from bow to stern. Her crew, a sooty collection of men in the nondescript clothing of real torpedo boat service, turned their faces toward the flagship.

The commander, standing just behind the conning tower, lifted a megaphone to his lips. His voice rang clear to everybody aboard the flagship:

“I have to report, sir, that two of the enemy's torpedo gun-boats tried to escape yesterday from Havana and were chased back by the *Iowa* and the *Wilmington*. One has since gotten out and gone to the eastward.”

These sentences, spoken very deliberately, with a pause after every word, made everybody prick up his ears.

“Oh, ho!” said the junior officers; “this is not so bad, after all.” Below, officers just off the early morning watches were having a belated breakfast—two slices of toast, bacon and coffee. Other officers in bathrobes departed toward the tubs.

Somebody was rattling away on the piano, the tones of which on this huge steel-bulwarked and compartmented mass penetrate only to the gun-deck through the medium of an open hatch. On the gun-deck the jack tars were asleep, writing or working, or in some cases grouped to discuss in angry despair the improbability of an immediate fight. One was sewing, scowling and with pursed lips, as attentive and serious over the task as a seamstress. Two paced

nervously to and fro, explaining to each other their idea of a headlong assault on Havana. Others were thoughtfully polishing the guns.

The *New York* strolled westward on a line parallel with the coast. The *Wilmington* appeared close inshore to the east. The *Porter* loafed listlessly astern of the flagship, her keen bow and three slanted stacks lifting and falling with infinite grace over the choppy sea. See that yellow band on her forward funnel? Well, that is the easiest way to distinguish her from the *Dupont*.

The extremes of the coast line were misty, but an officer defined a certain depression in the hills as indicating the position of Havana.

The flagship steamed slowly inshore. Newspaper dispatch boats, as if able to scent excitement or interest, loomed up to the north, a bunch of them, with every funnel streaming thick smoke, coming on furiously.

The details of Havana grew slowly out of the mist. Morro Castle, low to the water, bared an outline which, strangely enough, was exactly like a preconception of it evolved from pictures. On the sides of the hills to its right were two long, straight yellow scars, modern batteries.

With immense dignity the *New York* steamed at a distance of six miles past the Havana fortifications. The deck forward was crowded with observant jacks and the quarterdeck was crowded with officers. The canvas surrounding the forward bridge allowed only the busts of officers to be seen, motionless heads in profile, crooked elbows with hands upholding glasses, which were all turned toward the grim capital. Far at sea were two faint, castellated, moving islands: the *Iowa* and the *Indiana*. Everybody thought the Spanish batteries would open on the flagship. Everybody on board the flagship hoped so. The newspaper boats pounded eagerly along in the rear. But Havana remained silent, enigmatical. The only fun was allowing the imagination to dwell upon the emotions, gestures, orations which were hidden behind the six miles which separated the ships from Havana.

Meanwhile the *Wilmington* had turned and headed off to sea. It was reported that she, at any rate, had been fired upon by the batteries, but no action was visible to the eye, other than the movement of innumerable waves and slow forging of the warships.

Presently the *Iowa* and *Indiana* disappeared. The *Wilmington* turned and resumed her beat to the eastward. The *Porter* sped away on some mission or to return to her station. And again the *New York* was alone, save for the two dim points on the horizon.

Over a brilliant sea she swung again to the northeast. The bugle for the regular call to quarters pealed through the ship, even when the houses of Havana could be counted, and as usual the marines and a division of blue jackets formed on the quarterdeck. After inspection they took their trot about the deck in perfect rhythm to the music of the band which played a rollicking, fascinating melody.

It was a peaceful scene. In fact it was more peaceful than peace, since one's sights were adjusted for war.

(Source: *The Collected Works of Stephen Crane*, University of Virginia Press, 1973)