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Narrow Escape of the Three Friends

KEY WEST, May 20. Exceeding industry on the part of the naval commanders of the Cuban blockading fleet causes life in the service of newspapers to be full of interest.

More than one dispatch boat flying the pennant of a newspaper has been held up at midnight by shells that had every serious intention, but it remained for *The World's* tug *Three Friends* to hold an interview last night with the United States gunboat *Machias* which probably climaxes the situation.

We were all greatly entertained over an immediate prospect of being either killed by rapid-fire guns, cut in half by the ram or merely drowned, but we do not now anticipate that a longing for diversion will cause us to seek the vicinity of the *Machias* on a dark night for some months.

We had sailed from Key West on a mission that had nothing to do with the coast of Cuba, and that night, steaming due east and some thirty-five miles from the coast, we did not think we were liable to an affair with any of the fierce American cruisers.

Suddenly a familiar signal of red and white lights flashed like a brooch of jewels on the pall that covered the sea. It was far away and tiny. Answering lanterns sprang at once to the masthead of the *Three Friends*. The warship's signals vanished and the sea presented nothing but a smoky black stretch, lit with the hissing white tops of the flying waves. A thin line of flame swept from a gun. Thereafter followed one of those silences which have become so peculiarly instructive to the blockade-runner. Somewhere in the darkness we knew that a slate-colored cruiser, red below the water-line and with a gold scroll on her bows, was flying over the waves toward us, and a time was approaching when our identity had to be bawled across the wind and made clear to the warship in a blamed sight less than seventeen parts of a second if we didn't care to be smashed instantly into smithereens.

The pause was long. Then a voice spoke from the sea through a megaphone. It was faint, but clear. "What ship is that?"

"*The World* tug *Three Friends*," thundered the first mate. No one hesitates over his answer in cases of this kind. Everybody was desirous of imparting the fullest information in the shortest possible time. We wished for one of the flaming electric signs of upper Broadway.

There was another pause. Then out of the darkness flew an American cruiser, silent as death, handled as ferociously as if the devil commanded her. Again the little voice hailed from the bridge: "What ship is that?" Evidently the reply to the first hail had been misunderstood or not heard. This time the voice rang with menace—menace of destruction—and the last word was intoned savagely and strangely, as one would explain that the cruiser was after either fools or the common enemy.

The yells in return did not stop her; she was hurling herself forward to ram us amidships, and the people on the little *Three Friends* looked at a tall, swooping bow, and it was keener than any knife that has ever been made. As the cruiser lunged every man imagined the gallant and famous *Three Friends* cut into two parts as neatly as if she had been cheese.

But of course there was a sheer, and a hard sheer, to starboard, and toward our quarter swung a monstrous thing, larger than any ship in the world—the U.S.S. *Machias*. She had a free-board of about three hundred feet, and the top of her funnel was out of sight in the clouds. No living man has ever seen so big a ship as was the *Machias* last night. No living man has seen anything so sharp as her ram. And at a range of twenty paces every gun on her port side swept deliberately into perfect aim.

We all had an opportunity of looking several miles down the muzzles of this festive artillery before came the inevitable collision.

Then the *Machias* reeled her steel shoulder against the wooden side of the *Three Friends*, and up went a roar as if a vast shingle roof had fallen. The tug staggered, dipped as if she meant to pass under the warship, and finally righted, trembling from head to foot. The cries of the splintered timbers ceased. Men on the tug found time to say: “Well, I’ll be -- --.” The *Machias* backed away into the darkness even as the *Three Friends* drew slowly ahead.

Later, from some hidden part of the sea, the bullish eye of a searchlight looked at us and the widened white rays bathed us in light.

Then there was another hail.

“Hello, *Three Friends*!”

“Aye, aye.”

“Are you injured?”

“No, sir.”

The incident was closed, but it had impressed us. The worst or the best of it was that when the *Three Friends* had met the *Machias* last before this, terrific, bloodthirsty charge—it was late one afternoon off Cardenas—we had received this plaintive hail:

“Have you any onions, potatoes or eggs?” The gunboat had been on station for three weeks. Forthwith we had patriotically given up our last spud to the country’s defenders. These, then, were the ungrateful people who came at us with such dangerous fury. We wanted to demand the return of our potatoes.

But, after all, this one thing is certain. If we had been a Spanish gunboat there would not have been enough left of us to patch a tooth. This is the satisfaction we gain from our short interview with that fiery, blood-curdling crowd on the United States gunboat *Machias*.

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