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*New York World*

### *How Sampson Closed His Trap*

KEY WEST, MAY 26.—The *World* tug left Key West last Friday night, dogging the heels of a massive battleship heading straight for Havana. In the morning when the pale hills of Cuba arose in the south the New York came sweeping at high speed over the seas. Now was in progress a huge game, with wide and lonely stretches of ocean as the board, and with great steel ships as counters. From the coast of Maine to wherever the battleship Oregon was swarming northward the play was going on almost in silence, with only the noise of the rumors, false or uncertain, rising from the sea as the smoky mist rises from the back of a fast-flying wave.

The Spaniard made the first move. He played his fleet plump into the middle of the board, and he watches eagerly to see if our next move is a blunder.

He wants it to be, of course, and then he will dodge north, and with the entire fighting strength of the American Navy clamoring behind him he will attempt one fine bold raid on the coast, bowling over en route some score of protected cruisers and auxiliaries that plant themselves desperately in his path. That is his idea. That is his little game. He is now brilliantly juggling with the ball to see if he can't induce our anxious rush line to leave him an opening.

He perfectly understands that he can successfully meet neither Schley nor Sampson, and he understands, too, that if one American squadron reinforces the other within striking distance of him his name is the equivalent of wet dust and Cadiz will see its ships no more.

So he is juggling his fleet here and there dexterously. Schley has gone somewhere at a pace and with enough coal to confuse and defeat a modest newspaper tug. Ostensibly he has gone to line up in the Yucatan Channel and send scouting cruisers to locate the enemy. He has probably found them by now, but off Havana here everything is peaceful save the sea, which is spinning the small fry as if they were tops.

The interest of Havana in our movements must be intense. Sometimes twenty sails are in sight of the shore batteries. Yesterday we steamed up within range and looked over the defenses. They are making a very nice collection of modern artillery in Havana and have it all arranged neatly behind earthworks. It makes a man sad to think they have accomplished all the formidable part of their system of defense since the beginning of the war.

Nobody cares about Morro Castle, which is about as important to Havana as Governors Island is to New York, but it will be a bitter thing if we lose any gallant men from the fire of the batteries our strange policy allowed to be completed. A few shells judiciously applied from time to time would have prevented their completion.

Our scouts are out in the Windward Passage. It is possible that the enemy's fleet may escape Schley and instead of dashing far to the northward may attempt to run into Havana. If they do they will be gently but firmly received by a committee formed of Admiral Sampson's fleet. Meanwhile, with our cabin deep with threshing water and with the flying spray rusting the

very top of our smokestack, we are pounding along after the flagship in the hope that something may happen.

All day Saturday and all day Sunday the New York lay off Havana palavering with this cruiser and that cruiser by wigwagging and otherwise. Then Monday morning the *New York* headed into the teeth of the eastern gale, and at her heels a fleet followed.

Heroically the infinitesimal newspaper tugs struggled on the trail. Slowly the fighting tops sank out of our sight over the horizon. But the newspaper contingent thrashed on. At noon on Tuesday we were rewarded. We sighted a regular pine forest of spars, and heading for it we raised one after another of the squadron from the deep. They were moving at a speed of about four knots toward the mouth of the Old Bahama Channel.

The *New York* of course led the van, followed by the castellated *Indiana*, which resembled the moving home of a Rhenish baron. After this fighting division came a swarm of impatient cruisers and gunboats led by a new member of the fleet, graceful and fine-bred as a cruiser could be.

If an artist wished to paint a picture of the battle of Mobile Bay he could in fact use as a model any of the Newport type of gunboats.

The *Mayflower* and the torpedo boats were lagging at the rear, and far to southward was a converted yacht, name unknown to us. All hands speculated in lively fashion as to the mission of the squadron. We felt, at any rate, that the flag was down and we were off.

Late in the afternoon another cruiser appeared from the direction of Key West steaming at full speed, with the blue pennant and white star of Commodore Watson flying at her masthead, which whirled in silence past the long line of warships. But everybody knew why she had come. It was to bring dispatches to the Admiral.

About 4,500 pairs of eyes fastened eagerly on the flagship, but nothing came off. The sun fell amid marvelous tones of crimson, purple, orange, even blue and green, and on the lighted sea the grim ships raised their somber shapes.

At twilight red battle lanterns flashed at the stern of each of these ominous slate-colored machines. Suddenly a blaze of signal lights appeared above the shadowy hull of the flagship. They changed, winked, vanished, reappeared, red, white, red, white, white, red, red, scintillant and beautiful as the jewels of a goddess. Then from the spaces of the dim blue sea before us appeared a sort of a bobble of entrancing lights. Every ship far and near was answering, calling, ordering, explaining, until the whole eastern horizon was dotted blood-red and white.

But finally, presto! the fleet was gone. The smoky blue darkness had swallowed them in a second. It was only when we had steamed forward several miles that we caught again the glimpse of the battle lanterns at the stern.

The whole thing had been an ideal subject for a capitalized "Night Before the Battle," and there were many who wondered if it were really so.

The dawn of Wednesday revealed the fleet headed in line to the westward again. Five miles to the northward a flying division of the fastest ships in the squadron had been formed under Commodore Watson. His flagship headed it, and then followed in line the others at perfectly preserved intervals.

No word came from either Key West or the speeding scouts ever guarding the *Virgin*, the *Mona*, and the *Windward*. No word from *Schley*. The fleet barely moved, but stayed always off *Santa Maria Keys*, on the Cuban coast.

The correspondents debated bitterly the question of why the admiral clung so closely to this particular spot, but it was generally understood among the naval officers that *Schley's* raid

into the waters of South Cuba had placed Sampson's fleet in position as the second line of defense, and that then the Strategy Board had probably ordered Sampson to assemble his ships at a point somewhere off Cayo France's light, or Cayo Santa Maria, because there was the junction of three vitally important channels—the Santaren, the Nicholas and the Old Bahama.

In case the scouts report the Spanish fleet is bottled in some southern harbor by Schley, or as coming toward some of the eastward passages, Sampson is already at the mouth of the Old Bahama Channel and has gained thirty-six hours from Key West for his heaviest ships. Then, in the remote possibility of some Spanish ships breaking around Cape Antonio and heading for Havana or if any happening demands the fleet's presence off Havana he has a short road by way of the Nicholas Channel.