THE GUNS FOR CUBA

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"THE shore part must lie entirely with you, sir," said Captain Kettle. "It's mixed up with the Foreign Enlistment Act, and the Alabama case, and a dozen other things which may mean anything between gaol and confiscation, and my head isn't big enough to hold it. If you'll be advised by me, sir, you'll see a real first−class solicitor, and stand him a drink, and pay him down what he asks right there on the bar counter, and get to know exactly how the law of this business stands before you stir foot in it.

"The law here in England," said the little man with a reminiscent sigh, "is a beastly thing to fall foul of: it's just wickedly officious and interfering; it's never done kicking you, once it's got a fair start; and you never know where it will shove out its ugly hoof from next. No, Mr. Gedge, give me the States for nice comfortable law where a man can buy it by the yard for paper money down, and straight pistol shooting is always remembered in his favour."

The young man who owned the SS. Sultan of Borneo tapped his blotting paper impatiently. "Stick to the point, Kettle. We're in England now, and have nothing whatever to do with legal matters in America. As for your advice, I am not a fool; you can lay your ticket on it I know to an inch how I stand. And I may tell you this: the shipment is arranged for."

"I'd like to see us cleared," said Captain Kettle doubtfully.

"No one will interfere with the clearance. The Sultan of Borneo will leave here in coal, consigned to the Havana. A private yacht will meet her at sea, and tranship the arms out of sight of land."

"Tyne coal for Cuba? They'd get their coal there from Norfolk, Virginia, or else Welsh steam coal from Cardiff or Newport."

"It seems not. This contract was placed long before a ship was asked for to smuggle out the arms."

"Well it looks fishy, anyway."

"I can't help that," said Gedge irritably. "I'm telling you the naked truth, and if truth as usual looks unlikely, it's not my fault. Now have you got any more objections to make?"

"No, sir," said Captain Kettle, "none that I can see at present."

"Very well, then," said Gedge. "Do you care to sign on as master for this cruise, or are you going to cry off?"

"They'll hang me if I'm caught," said Kettle.

"Not they. They'll only talk big, and the British Consul will get you clear. You bet they daren't hang an Englishman for mere smuggling in Cuba. And besides, aren't I offering to raise your screw from twelve pound a month to fourteen so as to cover the risk? However, you won't get caught. You'll find everything ready for you;

you'll slip the rifles ashore; and then you'll steam on to Havana and discharge your coal in the ordinary hum−drum way of business. And there's a ten pound bonus if you pull the thing off successfully. Now then, captain, quick: you go or you don't?"

"I go," said Kettle gloomily. "I'm a poor man with a wife and family, Mr. Gedge, and I can't afford to lose a berth. But it's that coal I can't swallow. I quite believe in what you say about the contract; only it doesn't look natural. And it's my belief the coal will trip us up somewhere before we've done, and bring about trouble."

"Which of course you are quite a stranger to?" said Gedge slily.

"Don't taunt me with it, sir," said Captain Kettle. "I quite well know the kind of brute I am; trouble with a crew or any other set of living men at sea is just meat and drink to me, and I'm bitterly ashamed of the taste. Every time I sit underneath our minister in the chapel here in South Shields I grow more ashamed. And if you heard the beautiful poetical way that man talks of peace and green fields, and golden harps, you'd understand."

"Yes, yes," said Gedge; "but I don't want any of your excellent minister' sermons at second hand just now, Captain, or any of your own poetry, thanks. I'm very busy. Good morning. Help yourself to a cigar. You haul alongside the coal shoots at two o'clock, and I'll be on board to see you at six. Good morning." And Mr. Gedge rang for the clerk, and was busily dictating letters before Kettle was clear of the office.

The little sailor went down the grim stairs and into the street, and made towards the smelling Tyne. The black cigar rested unlit in an angle of his mouth, and he gnawed savagely at the butt with his eye−teeth. He cursed the Fates as he walked. Why did they use him so evilly that he was forced into berths like these? As a bachelor, he told himself with a sneer, he would have jumped at the excitement of it. As the partner of Mrs. Kettle, and the father of her children, he could have shuddered when he threw his eye over the future. For a week or so she could draw his half−pay and live sumptuously at the rate of seven pounds a month. But afterwards, if he got caught by some angry Spanish war−steamer with the smuggled rifles under his hatches, and shot, or hanged, or imprisoned, or otherwise debarred from earning income at his craft, where would Mrs. Kettle be then? Would Gedge do anything for her?

He drew the cigar from his lips, and spat contemptuously at the bare idea. With the morality of the affair he troubled not one jot. The Spanish Government and the Cuban rebels were two rival firms who offered different rates of freight according to the risk and he was employed as carrier by those who paid the higher price. If there was any right or wrong about the question, it was a purely private matter between Mr. Gedge and his God. He, Owen Kettle, was as impersonal in the business as the ancient Sultan of Borneo herself; he was a mere cog in some complex machinery; and if he was earning heaven, it was by piety inside the chapel ashore, and not by professional exertions (in the interests of an earthly employer) elsewhere.

He took ferry across the filthy Tyne, and walked down alleys and squalid streets where coal dust formed the mud, and the air was sour with foreign vapours. And as he walked he champed still at the unlit cigar, and brooded over the angularity of his fate. But when he passed between the gates of the dock companies premises, and exchanged words with the policeman on guard, a change came over him. He threw away the cigar stump, tightened his lips, and left all thoughts of personal matters outside the door−sill. He was Mr. Gedge's hired servant; his brain was devoted to furthering Gedge s interests; and all the acid of his tongue was ready to spur on those who did the manual work on Gedge's ship.

Within a minute of his arrival on her deck, the Sultan of Borneo was being unmoored from the bollards on the quay; within ten, her winches were clattering and bucking as they warped her across to the black, straddling coal−shoots at the other side of the dock; and within half an hour the cargo was roaring down her hatches as fast as the railway waggons on the grimy trestle overhead could disgorge.

The halo of coal dust made day into dusk; the grit of it filled every cranny, and settled as an amorphous scum on the water of the dock; and labourers hired by the hour, toiled at piece−work pace through sheer terror at their employer.

If his other failings could have been eliminated, the little skipper, with the red−peaked beard, would certainly have been, from an owner's point of view, the best commander sailing out of an English port. No man ever wrenched such a magnificent amount of work from his hands. But it was those other failings which kept him what he was, the pitiful knockabout ship−master. Living from hand to mouth, never certain of his berth from one month's end to another.

That afternoon Captain Kettle signed on his crew, got them on board, and with the help of his two mates kicked the majority of them into sobriety; he received a visit and final instructions from Mr. Gedge at six o clock; and by night−fall he had filled in his papers, warped out of dock, and stood anxiously on the bridge watching the pilot as he took the steamboat down through the crowded shipping of the river. His wife stood under the glow of an arc lamp on the dock head and waved him good−bye through the gloom.

Captain Kettle received his first fright as he dropped his pilot just outside the Tyne pier heads. A man of war's launch steamed up out of the night, and the boarding officer examined his papers and asked questions. The little captain, conscious of having no contraband of war on board just then, was brutally rude; but the naval officer remained stolid, and refused to see the insults which were pitched at him. He had an unpalatable duty to perform; he quite sympathised with Kettle's feelings over the matter; and he got back to his launch thanking many stars that the affair had ended so easily.

But Kettle rang on his engines again with very unpleasant feelings. It was clear to him that the secret was oozing out somewhere; that the Sultan of Borneo was suspected; that his course to Cuba would be beset with many well−armed obstacles; and he forthwith made his first ruse out of the long succession which were to follow.

He had been instructed by Gedge to steam off straight from the Tyne to a point deep in the North Sea, where a yacht would meet him to hand over the consignment of smuggled arms. But he felt the night to be full of eyes, and for a Havana−bound ship to leave the usual steam−lane which leads to the English Channel, was equivalent to a confession of her purpose from the outset. So he took the parallel rulers and pencilled off on his chart the stereotyped course, which just clears Whitby and Flamboro' Head; and the Sultan of Borneo was held steadily along this, steaming at her normal nine knots; and it was not till she was out of sight of land off Humber mouth, and the sea chanced to be desolate, that he starboarded his helm and stood off for the ocean rendezvous.

A hand on the foretopsail yard picked up the yacht out of the grey mists of dawn, and by eight bells they were lying hove−to in the trough, with a hundred yards of cold grey water tumbling between them. The transhipment was made in two lifeboats, and Kettle went across and enjoyed an extravagant breakfast in the yacht's cabin. The talk was all upon the Cuban revolution. Carnforth, the yacht's owner, brimmed with it.

"If you can run the blockade, Captain," said he, "and land these rifles, and the Maxims, and the cartridges, they'll be grateful enough to put up a statue to you. The revolution will end in a snap. The Spanish troops are half of them fever−ridden, and all of them discouraged. With these guns you are carrying, the patriots can shoot their enemies over the edges of the island into the Caribbean Sea. And there is no reason why you should get stopped. There are filibustering expeditions fitted out every week from Key West, and Tampa, and the other Florida ports, and one or two have even started from New York itself."

"But they haven't got through?" suggested Captain Kettle. "Not all of them," Mr. Carnforth admitted. "But then you see they sailed in schooners, and you have got steam. Besides, they started from the States, where the newspapers knew all about them, and so their arrival was cabled on to Cuba ahead; and you have the advantage of sailing from an English port."

"I don't see where the pull comes in," said Kettle gloomily. "There isn't a blessed country on the face of the globe more interfering with her own people than England. A Yankee can do as he darn well pleases in the filibustering line; but if a Britisher makes a move that way, the blessed law here stretches out twenty hands and plucks him back by the tail before he's half started. No, Mr. Carnforth, I'm not sweet on the chances. I'm a poor man, and this means a lot to me that's why I'm anxious. You're rich; you only stand to lose the cost of the consignment; and if that gets confiscated it won't mean much to you."

Carnforth grinned. "You pay my business qualities a poor compliment, Captain. You an bet your life I had money down in hard cash before I stirred foot in the matter. The weapons and the ammunition were paid for at fifty per cent. above list prices, so as to cover the trouble of secrecy, and I got a charter for the yacht to bring the stuff out here which would astonish you if you saw the figures. No, I'm clear on the matter from this moment, Captain, but I'll not deny that I shall take an interest in your future adventures with the cargo. Help yourself to a cigarette " (sic)

"Then it seems to me," said Kettle acidly, "that you'll look at me just as a hare set on to run for your amusement?"

The yacht−owner laughed. "You put it brutally," he said, "but that's about the size of it. And if you want further truths, here's one: I shouldn't particularly mind if you were caught."

"How's that?"

"Because, my dear skipper, if the Spanish captured this consignment, the patriots would want another, and I should get the order. Whereas, if you land the stuff safely, it will see them through to the end of the war, and my chance of making further profit will be at an end."

"You have a very clear way of putting it," said Captain Kettle.

"Haven't I? Which will you take, green chartreuse or yellow?"

"And Mr. Gedge? Can you tell me, sir, how he stands over this business?"

"Oh, you bet, Gedge knows when to come in out of the wet. He's got the old Sultan underwritten by the insurance and by the Cuban agents up to double her value, and nothing would suit his books better than for a Spanish cruiser to drop upon you."

Captain Kettle got up, reached for his cap, and swung it aggressively on to one side of his head.

"Very well," he said, "that's your side of the question. Now hear mine. That cargo's going through, and those rebels or patriots, or whatever they are, shall have their guns if half the Spanish navy was there to try and stop me. You and Mr. Gedge have started about this business the wrong way. Treat me on the square and I'm a man a child might handle; but I'd not be driven by the Queen of England, no, not with the Emperor of Germany to help her."

"Oh, look here, Captain," said Carnforth, "don't get your back up."

"I'll not trade with you," replied Kettle.

"You're a fool to your own interests."

"I know it," said the sailor grimly. I've known it all my life. If I'd not been that, I'd not have found myself in such shady company as there is here now."

"Look here, you ruffian, if you insult me I'll kick you out of this cabin, and over the side into your own boat."

"All right," said Kettle; "start in." Carnforth half rose from his seat and measured Captain Kettle with his eye. Apparently the scrutiny impressed him, for he sank back to his seat again with an embarrassed laugh. "You're an ugly little fiend," he said.

"I'm all that," said Kettle.

"And I'm not going to play at rough and tumble with you here. We've neither of us anything to gain by it. And I've a lot to lose. I believe you'll run that cargo through now that you're put on your mettle, but I guess there'll be trouble for somebody before it's dealt out to the patriot troops. Gad, I'd like to be somewhere on hand to watch you do it." "I don't object to an audience," said Kettle.

"By Jove, I've half a mind to come with you."

"You'd better not," said the little sailor with glib contempt. "You're not the sort that cares to risk his skin, and I can't be bothered with dead−head passengers."

"That settles it," said Carnforth. "I'm coming with you to run that blockade; and if the chance comes, my cantankerous friend, I'll show you I can be useful. Always supposing, that is, we don't murder one another before we get there."

A white mist shut the Channel sea into a ring, and the air was noisy with the grunts and screams of steamers' syrens. Captain Kettle was standing on the Sultan of Borneo's upper bridge, with his hand on the engineroom telegraph, which was pointed at "Full speed astern"; Carnforth and the old second mate stood with their chins over the top of the starboard dodger; and all three of them peered into the opalescent banks of the fog.

They had reason for their anxiety. Not five minutes before, a long lean torpedo−catcher had raced up out of the thickness, and slowed down alongside with the Channel spindrift blowing over her low super−structure in white hail storms. An officer on the upper bridge in glistening oilskins had sent across a sharp authoritative hail, and had been answered: "Sultan of Borneo; Kettle, master; from South Shields to the Havana."

"What cargo?" came the next question.

"Coal."

"What?"

"Coal."

"Then Mr. Tyne Coal for the Havana, just heave to whilst I send away a boat to look at you. I fancy you will be the steamboat I'm sent to find and fetch back."

The decks of the uncomfortable warship had hummed with men, a pair of boat davits had swung outboard, and the boat had been armed and manned with naval noise and quickness. But just then a billow of the fog had driven down upon them, blanket−like in thickness, which closed all human vision beyond the range of a dozen yards and Captain Kettle jumped like a terrier on his opportunity. He sent his steamer hard astern with a slightly ported helm, and whilst the torpedo catcher's boat was searching for him towards the French shore, and sending vain hails into the white banks of the mist, he was circling slowly and silently round towards the English coast.

So long as the mist held, the Sultan of Borneo was as hard to find as a needle in a cargo of hay. Did the air clear for so much as a single instant, she would be noticed and stand self−confessed by her attempt to escape; and as a result, the suspense was vivid enough to make Carnforth feel physical nausea. He had not reckoned on this complication. He was quite prepared to risk capture in Cuban waters, where the clamour of distance and the dazzle of helping insurrectionists would cast a glow of romance over whatever occurred. But to be caught in the English Channel as a vulgar smuggler for the sake of commercial profit, and to be haled back for hard labour in an English gaol, was a different matter. He was a member of Parliament, and he understood the details in all their niceties.

But Captain Kettle took the situation differently. The sight of the torpedo−catcher stiffened all the doubt and limpness out of his composition; his eye brightened and his lips grew stiff; the scheming to escape acted on him like a tonic; and when an hour later the Sultan of Borneo was steaming merrily down Channel at top speed through the same impenetrable fog, the little skipper whistled dance music on the upper bridge, and caught the notion for a most pleasing sonnet. That evening the crew came aft in a state of mild mutiny, and Kettle attended to their needs with gusto.

He prefaced his remarks by a slight exhibition of marksmanship. He cut away the vane which showed dimly on the fore−topmast truck with a single bullet, and then, after dexterously reloading his revolver, lounged over the white rail of the upper bridge with the weapon in his hand.

He told the malcontents he was glad of the opportunity to give them his views on matters generally. He informed them genially that for their personal wishes he cared not one decimal of a jot. He stated plainly that he had got them on board, and intended by their help to carry out his owner's instructions whether they hated them or not. And finally he gave them his candid assurance that if any cur amongst them presumed to disobey the least of his orders, he would shoot that man neatly through the head without further preamble.

This elegant harangue did not go home to all hands at once, because being a British ship, the Sultan of Borneo's crew naturally spoke in five different languages, and few of them had even a working knowledge of English. But the look of Kettle's savage little face as he talked, and the red torpedo beard which nagged beneath it, conveyed to them the tone of his speech, and for the time they did not require a more accurate translation. They had come off big with the intention of forcing him (if necessary with violence) to run the steamer there and then into an English port; they went forward again like a pack of sheep, merely because one man had let them hear the virulence of his bark, and had shown them with what accuracy he could bite if necessary. "And that's the beauty of a mongrel crew," said Kettle complacently. "If they'd been English, I'd have had to shoot at least two of the beasts to keep my end up like that."

"You're a marvel." Carnforth admitted. "I'm a bit of a speaker myself, but I never heard a man with a gift of tongue like you have got."

"I'm poisonous when I spread myself," said Kettle.

"I wish I was clear of you," said Carnforth, with an awkward laugh. "Whatever possessed me to leave the yacht and come on this cruise I can't think."

"Some people never do know when they're well off," said Kettle. "Well, sir, you're in for it now, and you may see things which will be of service to you afterwards. You ought to make your mark in Parliament if you do get back from this trip. You'll have something to talk about that men will like to listen to, instead of merely chattering wind, which is what most of them are put to, so far as I can see from the papers. And now, sir, here's the steward come to tell us tea's ready. You go below and tuck in. I'll take mine on the bridge here. It won't do for me to turn my back yet awhile, or else those beasts forrard will jump on us from behind and murder the whole lot whilst we aren't looking."

The voyage from that time onwards was for Captain Kettle a period of constant watchfulness. It would not be true to say that he never took off his clothes or never slept; but whether he was in pyjamas in the chart−house, or whether he was sitting on an up−turned ginger−beer case under the shelter of one of the upper bridge canvas dodgers, with his tired eyes shut and the red peaked beard upon his chest, it was always the same, he was ever ready instantly to spring upon the alert.

One dark night an iron belaying−pin flew out of the blackness of the forecastle and whizzed within an inch of his sleeping head; but he roused so quickly that he was able to shoot the thrower through the shoulder before he could dive back again through the forecastle door. And another time when a pondering gale had kept him on the bridge for forty−eight consecutive hours, and a deputation of the deck hands raided him in the chart−house on the supposition that exhaustion would have laid him out in a dead sleep, he woke before their fingers touched him, broke the jaw of one with a camp−stool, and so maltreated the others with the same weapon, that they were glad enough to run away even with the exasperating knowledge that they left their taskmaster undamaged behind them.

So, although this all−nation crew of the Sultan of Borneo dreaded the Spaniards much, they feared Captain Kettle far more, and by the time the steamer had closed up with the island of Cuba, they had concluded to follow out their skipper's orders, as being the least of the two evils which lay before them. Carnforth's way of looking at the manner was peculiar. He had all a healthy man's appetite for adventure, and all a prosperous man's distaste for being wrecked. He had taken a strong personal liking for the truculent little skipper, and, other things being equal, would have cheerfully helped him; but on the other hand, he could not avoid seeing that it was to his own interests that the crew should get their way, and keep the steamer out of dangerous waters. And so, when finally he decided to stand by non−interferent, he prided himself a good deal on his forbearance, and said so to Kettle in as many words.

That worthy mariner quite agreed with him. "It's the very best thing you could do, sir," he answered. "It would have annoyed me terribly to have had to shoot you out of mischief's way, because you've been kind enough to say you like my poetry, and because I've come to see, sir, you're a gentleman."

They came to this arrangement on the morning of the day they opened out the secluded bay in the southern Cuban shore where the contraband of war was to be run. Kettle calculated his whereabouts with niceness, and, after the midday observation, lay the steamer to for a couple of hours, and himself supervised his engineers whilst they gave a good overhaul to the machinery. Then he gave her steam again, and made his landfall four hours after sunset.

They saw the coast first as a black line running across the dim grey of the night. It rose as they neared it, and showed a crest fringed with trees, and a foot steeped in white mist, from out of which came the faint bellow of surf. Captain Kettle, after a cast of two, picked up his marks and teamed in confidently, with his side−lights dowsed, and three red lanterns in a triangle at his foremast head. He was feeling pleasantly surprised with the easiness of it all.

But when the steamer had got well into the bight of the bay, and all the glasses on the bridge were peering at the shore in search of answering lights, a blaze of radiance suddenly flickered on to her from astern, and was as suddenly eclipsed, leaving them for a moment blinded by its dazzle. It was a long truncheon of light which sprouted from a glowing centre away between the heads of the bay, and they watched it sweep past them over the surface of the water, and then sweep back again. Finally, after a little more dalliance, it settled on the steamer and lit her, and the ring of water on which she swam, like a ship in a lantern picture.

Carnforth swore aloud, and Captain Kettle lit a fresh cigar. Those of the mongrel crew who were on the deck went below to pack their bags.

"Well, sir," said Kettle cheerfully, "here we are. That's a Spanish gunboat with search light, all complete" he screwed up his eyes and gazed astern meditatively "She's got the heels of us too; by about five knots I should say. Just look at the flames coming out of her funnels. Aren't they just giving her ginger down in the stoke hold? Shooting will begin directly, and the other blackguards ashore have apparently forgotten all about us. There isn't a light anywhere."

"What are you going to do?" asked Carnforth.

"Follow out Mr. Gedge's instructions, sir, and put this cargo on the beach. Whether the old Sultan goes there too, remains to be seen."

"That gunboat will cut you off in a quarter of an hour if you keep on this course."

"With that extra five knots she can do as she likes with us, so I shan't shift my helm. It would only look suspicious."

"Good Lord!" said Carnforth, "as if our being here at all isn't suspicious itself."

But Kettle did not answer. He had, to use his own expression, "got his wits working under forced draught," and he could not afford time for idle speculation and chatter. It was the want of the answering signal ashore which upset him. Had that showed against the black background of hills, he would have known what to do.

Meanwhile the Spanish warship was closing up with him hand over fist, and a decision was necessary. Anyway, the choice was a poor one. If he surrendered he would be searched, and with that damning cargo of rifles and machine guns and ammunition under his hatches, it was not at all improbable that his captors might string him up out of hand. They would have right on their side for doing so.

The insurrectionists were not "recognized belligerents"; he would stand as a filibuster confessed; and as such would be due to suffer under that rough and ready martial law which cannot spare time to feed and gaol prisoners.

On the other hand, if he refused to heave to, the result would be equally simple; the warship would sink him with guns inside a dozen minutes; and reckless dare−devil though he might be, Kettle knew quite well there was no chance of avoiding this.

With another crew he might have been tempted to lay his old steamer alongside and try to carry her by boarding an sheer hand to hand fighting; but, excepting for those on watch in the stronghold, his present set of men were all below packing their belongings into portable shape, and he knew quite well that nothing would please them better than to see him discomfited. Carnforth was neutral; he had only his two mates, and the engineer officers to depend upon in all the available world; and he recognised between draughts at his cigar that he was in a very tight place.

Still the dark shore ahead remained unbeaconed, and the Spaniard was racing up astern, lit for battle, with her crew at quarters; and the guns run out and loaded. She leapt nearer by fathoms to the second, till Kettle could hear the panting of her engines as she chased him down. His teeth chewed on the cigar butt, and dark rings grew under his eyes. He could have raged aloud at his impotence.

The war steamer ranged up alongside, slowed to some forty revolutions so as to keep her place, and an officer on the top of her chart−house hailed in Spanish.

"Gunboat ahoy," Kettle bawled back; "you must speak English or I can't be civil to you."

"What ship is this?"

"Sultan of Borneo, Kettle, master. Out of Shields."

"Where for?"

"The Havana."

Promptly the query came back: "Then what are you doing in here?"

Carnforth whispered a suggestion. "Fresh water, run out; condenser water given all hands dysentery; put in here to fill up tanks."

"I thank you, sir," said Kettle in the same undertone, "I'm no hand at lying myself, or I might have thought of that before." And he shouted the excuse across to the spokesman on the chart−house roof.

To his surprise they seemed to give weight to it. There was a short consultation, and the steamers slipped along over the smooth black waters of the bay on parallel courses.

"Have you got dysentery bad aboard?" came the next question.

Once more Carnforth prompted, and Kettle repeated his words: "Look at my decks," said he. "All my crew are below. I've hardly a man to stand by me."

There was more consultation among the gunboat's officers, and then came the fatal inquiry: "What's your cargo, Captain?"

"Oh, coals," said Captain Kettle resignedly.

"What? You're bringing Tyne coal to the Havana?'

"Just coals," said Captain Kettle with a bitter laugh.

The tone of the Spaniard changed. "Heave to at once," he ordered, "whilst I send a boat to search you. Refuse, and I'll blow you out of the water."

On the Sultan of Borneo's upper bridge Carnforth swore. "Eh− ho, Skipper," he said, "the game's up, and there's no way out of it. You won't be a fool, will you, and sacrifice the ship and the whole lot of us? Come, I say, man, ring off your engines, or that fellow will shoot, and we shall all be murdered uselessly. I tell you, the games's up."

"By James!" said Kettle, "is it? Look there" and he pointed with outstretched arm to the hills on the shore ahead. "Three fires!" he cried. "Two above one in a triangle, burning like Elswick furnaces amongst the trees. They're ready for us over yonder, Mr. Carnforth, and that's their welcome. Do you think I'm going to let my cargo be stopped after getting it this far?" He turned to the Danish quartermaster at the wheel, with his savage face close to the man's ear.

"Starboard," he said. "Hard over, you bung−eyed Dutchman. Starboard as far as she'll go."

The wheel engines clattered briskly in the house underneath, and the Sultan of Borneo's head swung off quickly to port. For eight seconds the officer commanding the gunboat did not see what was happening, and that eight seconds was fatal to his vessel. When the inspiration came, he bubbled with orders, he starboarded his own helm, he rang "full speed ahead" to his engines, and ordered every rifle and machine gun on his bridge to sweep the British steamer's bridge. But the space of time was too small. The gunboat could not turn with enough quickness;

on so short a notice the engines could not get her into stride again; and the shooting, though well intentioned and prodigious in quantity, was poor in aim. The bullets whisped through the air, and pelted on the plating like a hailstorm, and one of them flicked out the brains of the Danish quartermaster on the bridge; but Kettle took the wheel from his hands, and a moment later the Sultan of Borneo's stem crashed into the gunboat's unprotected side just abaft the sponson of her starboard quarter gun.

The steamers thrilled like kicked biscuit−boxes, and a noise went up into the hot night sky as of ten thousand boiler makers, all heading up their rivets at once.

On both ships the propellers stopped as if by instinct, and then in answer to the telegraph, the grimy collier backed astern. But the war−steamer did not move. Her machinery was broken down. She had already got a heavy list towards her wounded side, and every second the list was increasing as the sea water poured in through the shattered plates. Her crew was buzzing with disorder. It was evident that the vessel had but a short time longer to swim, and their lives were sweet to them. The had no thought of vengeance. Their weapons lay deserted on the sloping decks. The grimy crews from the stoke holds poured up from below, and one and all they clustered about the boats with frenzied haste to see them floating in the water.

There was no more to be feared at their hands for the present.

Carnforth clapped Kettle on the shoulder in involuntary admiration. "By George," he cried, "what a daring scoundrel you are. Look here. I'm on your side now if I can be of any help. Can you give me a job?"

"I'm afraid, sir" said Captain Kettle, "that the old Sultan's work is about done. She's settling down by the head already. Didn't you see those rats of men scuttling up from forrard directly after we'd rammed the Don? I guess that was a bit of a surprise packet for them anyway. They thought they'd get down there to be clear of the shooting, and they found themselves in the most ticklish part of the ship."

"There's humour in the situation," said Carnforth. "But the case will keep. For the present it strikes me that this old steamboat is swamping fast."

"She's doing that," Kettle admitted. "She'll have a lot of plates started forrard, I guess. But I think she's come out of it very creditably, sir. I didn't spare her, and she's not exactly built for a ram."

"I suppose it's a case of putting her on the beach?"

"There's nothing else for it," said Kettle with a sigh. "I should like to have carried those blessed coals into the Havana if it could have been done, just to show people ours was a bona fide contract, as Mr. Gedge said, in spite of its fishy look. But this old steamboat's done her whack, and that's the square truth. It will take her all she can manage to reach shore with her dry decks. Look, she's in now nearly to her forecastle head. Lucky the shore's not steep to here, or else ."

From beneath there came a bump and a rattle, and the steamer for a moment halted in her progress, and a white−crested wave surged past her rusty flanks. Then she lifted again and swooped further in, with the propeller still squattering astern; and then once more she thundered down again into the sand; and so lifting and striking, made her way in through the surf.

More than one of the hands was swept from her decks, and reached the shore by swimming; but as the ebb made, the hungry seas left her stranded dry under the morning's light, and a crowd of insurrectionists waded out and climbed on board by ropes which were thrown to them.

They were men of every tint, from the grey black of the pure negro to the sallow lemon tint of the blue−blooded Spaniard. They were streaked with wounds, thin as skeletons, and clad more with nakedness than with rags; and so wolfish did they look that even Kettle, callous little ruffian though he was, half regretted bringing arms for such a crew to wreak vengeance on their neighbours.

But they gave him small time for sentiment of this brand. They clustered round him with leaping hands, till the morning sea−fowl fled affrighted from the beach. El Senor Capitan Inglese was the saviour of Cuba, and let everyone remember it. Alone, with his unarmed vessel, he had sunk a warship of their hated enemies; and they prayed him (in their florid compliment) to stay on the island and rule over them as king.

But the little sailor took them literally. "What's this?" he said; "you want me to be your blooming king?"

"El rey!" they shouted. "El rey de los Cubaños!"

"By James," said Kettle, "I'll do it. I was never asked to be a king before, and I'm just out of a berth right now, and England will be too hot to hold me yet awhile. Yes, I'll stay and boss you, and if you can act half as ugly as you look, we'll give the Dons a lively time. Only remember there's no tomfoolery about me. If I'm king of this show, I'm going to carry a full king's ticket, and if there's any man tries to meddle without being invited, that man will go to his own funeral before he can think twice. And now we'll just begin business at once. Off with those hatches and break out that cargo. I've been at some pains to run these guns out here, so be careful carrying them up the beach. Jump lively now, you black−faced scum."

Carnforth listened with staring eyes. What sort of broil was this truculent little scamp going to mix in next? He knew enough of Spanish character to understand clearly that the offer of the crown was merely an empty civility; he understood enough of Kettle to be sure he had not taken it as such, and would assert his rights to the bitter end. And when he thought of what that end must inevitably be he sighed over Owen Kettle's fate.