

OUR GUNBOATS FIRED ON

Bad Marksmen at Havana All That Saved the Vicksburg and Morrill from Being Hit.

SCHOONER DREW THEM TOO FAR

Eight-Inch Shrapnel Shell from the Santa Clara Batteries Fell Near the Vessels—The French Warship Dubourdieu.

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KEY WEST, Fla., May 8.—The Vicksburg and the cutter Morrill were under fire off Havana yesterday morning, for over half an hour, from the guns of the Santa Clara water batteries. Both escaped without material injury, although shrapnel shells from 8-inch guns exploded all about them, and both now show the scars of the Spanish bullets.

The wily Spaniards arranged a neat trap to send a couple of our ships to the bottom. A small schooner was sent out from Havana Harbor shortly before daylight yesterday morning to draw some of the Americans into the ambush. The ruse worked like a charm. The Vicksburg and the Morrill, in the heat of the chase, and in their contempt for Spanish gunnery, steamed straight into the trap that had been set for them. Had the Spaniards possessed their souls in patience but five minutes longer, not even the bad gun practice would have saved our ships, and this morning two more of our vessels would lie at the bottom, within two lengths of the wreck of the ill-starred Maine.

Friday evening the Vicksburg and the Morrill, cruising to the west of Morro Castle, were fired upon by the big guns of the Cojimar batteries. Two shots were fired at the Vicksburg and one at the Morrill. Both fell short, and both vessels, without returning the fire, steamed out of the range. It would have been folly to do otherwise. But yesterday morning the Spaniards had better luck. The schooner they had sent out before daylight ran off to the eastward, hugging the shore, with the wind on her starboard quarter. About three miles east of the entrance of the harbor she came over on the port tack. A light haze fringed the horizon, and she was not discovered until three miles off shore, when the Mayflower made her out and signaled the Morrill and Vicksburg. Capt. Smith of the Morrill and Commander Lillie of the Vicksburg immediately put on all steam and started in pursuit.

Under the Santa Clara Batteries.

The schooner instantly put about and ran for Morro Castle before the wind. On doing so, she would, according to the well-conceived Spanish plot, lead the two American warships directly under the guns of the Santa Clara batteries. These works are a short mile west of Morro, and are a part of the defenses of the harbor. There are two batteries, one at the shore, which has been recently thrown up, of sand and mortar, with wide embrasures for 8-inch guns, and the other on the crest of the rocky eminence which juts out into the waters of the Gulf at the point. The upper battery mounts modern 10-inch and 12-inch Krupp guns behind a six-foot stone parapet, in front of which are twenty feet of earthwork and a beating of railroad iron. This battery is considered the most formidable of Havana's defenses, except Morro Castle. It is masked, and has not been absolutely located by the American warships. It is probably due to the fact that the Spaniards did not desire to expose its position that the Vicksburg and Morrill are now afloat. The Morrill and Vicksburg were about six miles from the schooner when the chase began. They steamed after her at full speed, the Morrill leading until within a mile and a half of the Santa Clara batteries. Commander Smith of the Morrill was the first to realize the danger into which the reckless pursuit had led them. He concluded it was time to haul off and sent a shot across the bow of the schooner.

The Spanish skipper instantly brought his vessel about; but, while she was still rolling in the trough of the sea with her sails flapping, an eight-inch shrapnel shell came hurtling through the air from the water battery, a mile and a half away. It passed over the Morrill, between the pilot house and the smokestack, and exploded less than fifty feet on the port quarter. The small shot rattled against her side. It was a close call. Two more shots followed in quick succession, both shrapnel. One burst close under the starboard quarter, filling the engine room with the smoke of the exploding shell, and the other, like the first, passed over and exploded just beyond. The Spanish gunners had the range, and their time fuses were accurately set.

Projectile Grazes the Morrill.

The crews of both ships were at their guns. Lieut. Craig, who was in charge of the bow four-inch rapid-fire gun of the Morrill asked for and obtained permission to return the fire. At the first shot, the Vicksburg, which was in the wake of the Morrill slightly in shore, sheered off and passed to windward under the Morrill's stern.

In the meantime, Capt. Smith, also put his helm to port, and was none too soon, for as the Morrill stood off a solid eight-inch shot grazed her starboard quarter and kicked up tons of water as it struck a wave 100 yards beyond. Capt. Smith said afterward that this was undoubtedly an eight-inch armor-piercing projectile, and that it would have passed through the Morrill's boilers had he not changed her course in the nick of time.

All the guns of the water battery were now at work. One of them cut the Jacob's ladder of the Vicksburg adrift, and another carried away a portion of the rigging. As the Morrill and the Vicksburg steamed away their aft guns were used, but only a few shots were fired. The Morrill's six-inch gun was elevated for 4,000 yards, and struck the earthwork repeatedly. The Vicksburg fired but three shots from a six-pounder. The Spaniards continued to fire shot and shell for twenty minutes, but none of the latter shots came within 100 yards. Some of them were so wild that they aroused the American jackies to jeers. The Spaniards only ceased firing when the Morrill and Vicksburg were completely out of range.

Spanish Gunnery Very Bad.

If all the Spanish gunners had been suffering from strabismus their practice could have not been worse. But the officers of both the Morrill and the Vicksburg frankly admit their own recklessness and the narrow escape their vessels had from destruction. They are firmly convinced that the pursuit of the schooner was a neatly planned trick, which almost proved successful.

If any one of the shots had struck the thin skin of either vessel it would have

offered no more resistance than a piece of paper to a rifle ball.

The accurate range of the first few shots is accounted for by the fact that the Spanish officers had ample time to make observations. The bearings of the two vessels were probably taken with a range finder at the Santa Clara battery, and as this battery is probably connected by wire with Morro, they were enabled to take bearings from both points, and by laborious calculations they fixed the position of the vessels pretty accurately. With such opportunity for observations it would be no great trick for an American gunner to drop a shell down the smokestack of a vessel.

As soon as the ships sheered off, after the first fire, the Spanish gunners lost the range, and their practice became ludicrous. If they had waited five minutes longer before opening fire, Capt. Smith says, it would have been well-nigh impossible to miss the target. Both Capt. Smith and Commander Lillie believe the Spanish refrained from using the upper batteries in order not to expose their exact location.

On Friday the French school ship Dubourdieu, carrying thirty guns in all, entered Havana Harbor. She was stopped by the Morrill, and two salutes were fired by the Annapolis when she showed her flag.

Interesting details are being added to the story of the entrance of the French frigate Dubourdieu into Havana yesterday. It is said that after the fleet released her she was seen transmitting heliograph signals to the Cuban shore.