

C. S. FORESTER'S VIVID STORY OF

END OF A RAIDER

With British ships of war in hot pursuit, the Konigsberg entered a shallow East African river.

She was safe. The British ships could not enter the shallow river. For months it was a haven for the German ship.

This dramatic story tells how the haven became a grave.

You will not find German East Africa shown on any modern map - if you want to know where it was you must use a pre-war atlas.

But in 1914 Germany held this colony with four hundred miles of coast facing out to the Indian Ocean - a pestilential coast, most of it, a land of swamps and fever save where the rich plateau reached the sea.

There are coral reefs there in plenty, and the coast is lashed continuously by the strong winds driven by the Indian monsoon.

At the end of July 1914, the ether was full of mysterious messages broadcast in code, for the world was on the brink of war.

One of the messages reached Dar-es-Salaam, the German East African port, and in obedience to it a great German cruiser came creeping out to sea.

She represented the best design in light cruisers up to that date. She could steam twenty-five knots, she could fire several four inch guns on the broadside. There was no British ship within two thousand miles of her which could catch her.

It is easy to imagine the havoc she would make among the British merchant ships as soon as war was declared.

Outside the port the British Cape squadron awaited her- three antique cruisers, not one strong enough to fight her singly.

But it was not a question of fighting. War had not been declared.

MEN FELL FAINTING IN HEAT

The Konigsberg swung off to the southward and casually worked up to twenty-three knots.

In four hours the British ships were far below the horizon, and the Konigsberg was free to do what she would. Not quite free, however.

Four hours at twenty-three knots meant a consumption of a hundred and twenty tons of coal - and the Konigsberg had left Dar-es-Salaam with no more than five hundred tons.

So soon was she up against the eternal problem that haunted every minute the thoughts of the captain of ships at sea without bases.

She turned north towards Aden. She captured and sank one merchant ship there.

Off the coast of Arabia, in rough seas and what is nearly the hottest atmosphere in the whole world, she met the one collier that had been able to evade the British cruisers.

Her toiling crew transferred a thousand tons of coal from one ship to the other – the two ships rolling and crashing together in the tremendous swell while the men fell fainting in the heat.

ARAB SPY TOLD OF PREY

The temperature was 120 in the shade and averaging the work meant that every man in twenty-four hours carried four tons of coal out of the hold of one ship into the bunkers of the other.

She was ready for anything now, with coal heaped on the decks and piled about the guns and even filling the gaps where the men slung their hammocks.

But there was the British Navy to reckon with. The wireless operator reported that he had heard no fewer than eleven British ships of war using their wireless close at hand.

The neighbourhood was too unhealthy and the *Konigsberg* headed south again.

Her captain, Loaf was not a born sea raider. This petty warfare against commerce irked him. He was glad when the crackling wireless gave him information of a nobler prey.

Some Arab spy had slipped across in a canoe from Zanzibar to the East African coast with news that an old feeble English cruiser had anchored there to overboard her antiquated machinery.

The wireless told Loaf just how the *Pegasus* was moored, just what her armament was – her guns had no more than half the range of the *Konigsberg*.

Most important of all, it gave the news that the *Pegasus* was unprotected by mine fields or obstructions.

PEGASUS IS SUNK

There followed careful examination of distances and currents, anxious reference to tide tables. Loaf's calculations were extraordinarily accurate.

He approached Zanzibar under cover of night, and at dawn at the very moment when there was light enough to see he was within range of the *Pegasus* – and just within range too so that the guns of the *Pegasus* could not reach him.

Only a few minutes' intense fire sufficed to send *Pegasus* to the bottom with a hundred men killed and wounded.

One well-aimed salvo uprooted the wireless mast and wrecked the wireless station ashore. Then the *Konigsberg* turned and dashed away for shelter from the swarm of ships which this exploit would call upon her.

She had a perfect shelter waiting for her, but Loaf's calculations had borne this in mind when he made his plans to attack the *Pegasus*.

HERCULEAN TASK OF REPAIR

Crossing the sea at top speed she dived into one of the mouths of the Ronn river, and this was the only mouth a ship of her size could enter, and only for one hour every fortnight at the moment of the highest spring tide could she pass over the bar.

She seemed to be safe enough and she set to work overhauling her severely tired machinery.

The safety she had found had nothing else to recommend it. The delta of the river is a haunt of pestilence.

The rapid yellow waters course for miles through mangrove swamps. There are millions of mosquitos there, and the mosquitos carry malaria.

There are tsetse flies, and they carry sleeping sickness. There are ticks and they carry relapsing fever.

At night a man has to choose between semi-suffocation under a mosquito net and being eaten alive by these pests.

It is unbearably hot, steamy, and the air is filled with the stink of decaying vegetable matter. Clothing mildews and iron rusts in a night.

Twenty-four hours in this hell on earth may leave a man an invalid for life.

The crew of the Konigsberg were doomed to spend eleven months there.

Outside the delta the seas were being comber for the Konigsberg.

A score of British cruisers- each burning their hundred and fifty tons of coal a day – were cruising about in search of her. The weeks went by with no clue to her whereabouts.

All the time the Konigsberg's repairs were growing nearer completion – despite the fact that some of her machinery had to be lifted out of her and transported with enormous labour through the swamps to workshops on shore.

'KONIGSBERG MUST BE DESTROYED'

The Rufiji delta was unknown territory to the British Navy. No Englishman had mapped it or even explored it.

The British did not even know that a ship of the Konigsberg's draught could enter it.

But just as a spy had delivered up the Pegasus to the Konigsberg, so did a spy deliver up the Koningsberg to the British.

Natives who had been brutally treated to the effort of transporting the Koningsberg's machinery told what they knew.

Finally, a sudden swoop by a British cruiser captured the German uaxillary *President*.

On board the *President* there were charts of the Rufiji delta – charts which the captain ought to have destroyed, charts which showed every channel with meticulous German accuracy.

The Admiralty wireless station in Whitehall crackled out messages to a score of ships which came hurrying in to blockade the coast of the Rufiji delta.

Now there were three ships which could both fight and catch the Koningsberg, there were slower cruisers too.

There was even a battle ship and of course the score of necessary supply ships – all this because at the outbreak of war no one had thought of posting just one of these fast cruisers near the Koningsberg.

It was all very well to have these fast and powerful ships ready, but it was useless seeing that they could not penetrate into the delta to get at her.

Reiterated orders came from the Admiralty that the Koningsberg must be destroyed.

And then one day a British officer at the masthead of a cruiser, peering through the mists over the top of the Rufiji forest, saw a tiny line among the tops of the trees.

It was the end of the pole topmast of the Koningsberg.

At once the Dartmouth, Chatham and Weymouth closed into the mud bank as near as they dared, and fifteen six-inch guns began to hurl shells ten miles into the forest.

It was a hopeless effort. The guns were being fired at extreme range, and no one could see where they fell.

MACHINE-GUNS IN THE MUD

If those three ships had fired into the forest every six-inch shell that the British Navy possessed the chances would still have been fifty to one against their sinking the Koningsberg.

As a proof of the chanciness of the bombardment a British shell actually hit and set fire to the Koningsberg's only collier, anchored some distance away.

That was not nearly enough success to justify the waste of valuable ammunition.

Moreover, it was a warning to Loaf.

He redoubled his preparations for defence.

The whole delta was covered with a network of telephone wires centring upon the ship.

There were lookout posts at every mouth of the river; wherever the mud was solid enough he posted machine-guns and one-pounders in case the British should try to send in a pinnace with a torpedo.

It meant condemning the wretched men who manned these posts to an existence in the mud worse even than for those retained on board if that can be imagined.

His sick list was growing every day – but this was war.

The indefatigable British tried a new plan. As they could not get at the Konigsberg they determined to render her harmless.

A laden Collier was taken into the only practicable river mouth, turned broadside on across the stream, and sunk there by explosive charges placed ready in her bottom.

The seamanship displayed was magnificent; the courage was British. The whole operation was carried out under a hail of bullets from the posts in the mud.

There was a heavy casualty list among the volunteers who had manned the collier (every single man on board the British squadron had volunteered for the service) and survivors were lucky to make their escape.

Within a week the racing current of the river had scoured out a new channel round the end of the collier, and all the trouble and all the lives had been wasted.

Something else must be tried.

ELEVEN MONTHS LATER

It is a far cry from the Amazon to the Rufiji, half the world divides them.

But at the outbreak of war there were being built in England two little ships for the Brazilian government intended for service in the Amazon.

Somebody thought of them now

They were desperately slow; they were much the same shape as a flat-iron and were, in consequence, desperately bad sea boats.

But they carried two six-inch guns apiece, and, more important than all, they drew only six feet of water.

A word from the Admiralty sent the tiny vessels out on the perilous voyage – across the Bay of Biscay, along the whole length of the Mediterranean, through the scorching heat of the Red Sea, braving the immense rollers of the Indian Ocean, until at last they reported to the admiral.

It was eleven months now since the Konigsberg had taken refuge in the delta.

THE SHIPS HAD ALTERED

At dawn that morning in July 1913, Loaf was called to the telephone at the urgent request of one of the observation posts.

The officer in charge there reported the approach of two British ships.

“What ships?”

“I can’t recognise them sir, I thought I knew every ship on the station. These are two I’ve never seen before. And they’re not in the identification list either.”

Small wonder that the officer did not recognise their silhouette.

Every exposed part of the little ships was guarded with steel plating or sacks of coal as a protection against the machine-guns in the forest.

They waddled solemnly up the river, anchored with the utmost deliberation and were ready to begin their bombardment.

An aeroplane flew overhead to spot for them – it had come perforce a long way already from the island of Malta – the only available landing ground, so that there was only enough petrol for a few minutes spotting.

The monitors began hurling their six-inch shells over the forest, while the aeroplane circled overhead.

Half the shells raised no splash at all being swallowed in the mud; and when it happened that they did raise a splash the chances were that it would be invisible among the tangle of trees.

Minute after minute went by, not a single shot was spotted, and the aeroplane, at its last gasp for petrol, had to fly home.

The Germans were under no such disadvantage. Within sight of the moored monitors was an observation post and a telephone.

Quickly the information was passed to the *Konigsberg*. At once five four-inch shells pitched close to the monitors, raising geysers of mud and water.

Although this was the very limit of the range of the four-inch guns the German practice was extraordinarily accurate.

The British ships hauled up their anchors and shifted their positions – and a minute later the redirected guns were pitching their shells close alongside again.

Next minute the *Mersey* was hit. Those little tin-clad ships were not built to withstand salvos of four-inch shells.

The British withdrew defeated and the Germans were given time to redouble their precautions – including the mounting, with incredible labour, of one of their guns for vertical fire against these unexpected aeroplanes.

Five days later, with repairs effected and ammunition replaced, the indomitable monitors came waddling in again.

Once more the aeroplanes, buffeted by turbulent tropical air, circled above.

It was a surprise to observers when a shrapnel shell from the newly mounted gun burst close to them, but they continued to circle nevertheless.

Petrol was running out and the shell bursts were coming closer, and still they had not seen the fall of a single shot from the monitors.

Then everything happened at once. At last the observers caught sight of a fountain of muddy water thrown up by one of the Severn's shells. They could correct range.

Next moment their aeroplane was hit by a shell – the very last shrapnel shell that the Konigsberg possessed.

The pilot, with his engine racketing itself to pieces knew he had only a few seconds more in the air. But the Severn had fired again, and he had seen where the shells fell.

“Range O.K. Four seconds left.”

The aeroplane glided down, but the Germans had no more shells to fire at it.

“H.T.” signalled the observer exultantly. H.T. means hit.

Two six-inch shells had pitched into the bows of the Konigsberg, spreading fire and destruction.

“H.T. H.T. H.T.” signalled the sinking aeroplane.

Then; “You are only hitting the bows. Try a shade to the right. H.T. Send a boat. We are coming down.”

The Konigsberg was doomed to destruction now.

She was hit by fifty six-inch shells beaten into a flaming wreck, which sank in the midst of a pillar of smoke and steam under the muddy waters of the Rufiji.

For years after her rusted upper works were still to be seen, a monument to the seventy casualties who suffered with her.