

The Tradesman's Return, Ernest Hemingway

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THEY CAME ON ACROSS IN THE NIGHT AND it blew a big breeze from the northwest. When the sun was up he sighted a tanker coming down the gulf and she stood up so high and white with the sun on her in that cold air that it looked like tall buildings rising out of the sea and he said to the nigger, "Where the hell are we?"  
The nigger raised himself up to look.

"Ain't nothing like that this side of Miami."  
"You know damn well we ain't been carried up to no Miami," he told the nigger.  
"All I say ain't no buildings like that on no Florida keys."  
"We've been steering for Sand Key."

"We've got to see it then. It or American shoals."  
Then in a little while he saw it was a tanker and not buildings and then in less than an hour he saw Sand Key light, straight, thin and brown, rising out of the sea right where it ought to be.  
"You got to have confidence steering," he told the nigger.

"I got confidence," the nigger said. "But the way this trip gone I ain't got confidence no more."  
"How's your leg?"  
"It hurts me all the time."

"It ain't nothing," the man said. "You keep it clean and wrapped up and it'll heal by itself."  
He was steering to the westward now to go in to lay up for the day in the mangroves by Woman Key where he would not see anybody and where the boat was to come out to meet them.  
"You're going to be all right," he told the Negro.

"I don't know," the nigger said. "I hurt bad."  
"I'm going to fix you up good when we get in to the place," he told him.  
"You aren't shot bad. Quit worrying."  
"I'm shot," he said. "I ain't never been shot before. Anyway I'm shot is bad."  
"You're just scared."

"No sir. I'm shot. And I'm hurting bad. I've been throbbing all night."  
The nigger went on grumbling like that and he could not keep from taking the bandage off to look at it.

"Leave it alone," the man who was steering told him. The nigger lay on the floor of the cockpit and there were sacks of liquor, shaped like hams, piled everywhere. He had made himself a place in them to lie down in. Every time he moved there was the noise of broken glass in the sacks and there was the odor of spilled liquor. The liquor had run all over everything. The man was steering in for Woman Key now. He could see it now plainly.

"I hurt," the nigger said. "I hurt worse all the time."  
"I'm sorry, Wesley," the man said. "But I got to steer."  
"You treat a man no better than a dog," the nigger said. He was getting ugly now, but the man was still sorry for him.

"I'm going to make you comfortable, Wesley," he said. "You lay quiet now."

"You don't care what happens to a man," the nigger said. "You ain't hardly human."

"I'm going to fix you up good," the man said. "You just lay quiet."

"You ain't going to fix me up," the nigger said. The man, whose name was Harry, said nothing then because he liked the nigger and there was nothing to do now but hit him, and he couldn't hit him. The nigger kept on talking.

"Why we didn't stop when they started shooting?"

The man did not answer.

"Ain't a man's life worth more than a load of liquor?"

The man was intent on his steering.

"All we have to do is stop and let them take the liquor."

"No," the man said. "They take the liquor and the boat and you go to jail."

"I don't mind jail," the nigger said. "But I never wanted to get shot." He was getting on the man's nerves now and the man was becoming tired of hearing him talk.

"Who the hell's shot worse?" he asked him. "You or me?"

"You're shot worse," the nigger said. "But I ain't never been shot. I didn't figure to get shot. I ain't paid to get shot. I don't want to be shot."

"Take it easy, Wesley," the man told him. "It don't do you any good to talk like that."

They were coming up on the key now. They were inside the shoals and as he headed her into the channel it was hard to see with the sun on the water. The nigger was going out of his head, or becoming religious because he was hurt; anyway he was talking all the time.

"Why they ran liquor now?" he said. "Prohibition's over. Why they keep up a traffic like that? Whyn't they bring the liquor in on the ferry?"

The man steering was watching the channel closely.

"Why don't people be honest and decent and make a decent honest living?" The man saw where the water was rippling smooth off the bank even when he could not see the bank in the sun and he named her off. He swung her around, spinning the wheel with one arm, and then the channel opened out and he took her slowly right up to the edge of the mangroves. He came astern on the engines and threw out the two clutches.

"I can put a anchor down," he said. "But I can't get no anchor up."

"I can't even move," the nigger said.

"You're certainly in a hell of a shape," the man told him.

He had a difficult time breaking out, lifting and dropping the small anchor but he got it over, and paid out quite a lot of rope and the boat swung in against the mangroves so they came right into the cockpit. Then he went back and down into the cockpit. He thought the cockpit was a hell of a sight, all right.

All night after he had dressed the nigger's wound and the nigger had bandaged his arm he had been watching the compass, steering, and when it came daylight he had seen the nigger lying there in the sacks in the middle of the cockpit, but then he was watching the seas and the compass

and looking for the Sand Key light and he had never observed carefully how things were. Things were bad.

The nigger was lying in the middle of the load of sacked liquor with his leg up. There were eight bullet holes through the cockpit splintered wide. The glass was broken in the windshield. He did not know how much stuff was smashed and wherever the nigger had not bled he himself had bled. But the worst thing, the way he felt at the moment, was the smell of booze. Everything was soaked in it. Now the boat was lying quietly against the mangroves but he could not stop feeling the motion of the big sea they had been in all night in the gulf.

"I'm going to make some coffee," he told the nigger. "Then I'll fix you up again."

"I don't want no coffee."

"I do," the man told him. But down below he began to feel dizzy so he came out on deck again.

"I guess we won't have coffee," he said.

"I want some water."

"All right."

He gave the Negro a cup of water out of a demijohn.

"Why you want to keep on running for when they started to shoot?"

"Why they want to shoot?" the man answered.

"I want a doctor," the nigger told him.

"What's a doctor going to do that I ain't done for you?"

"Doctor going to cure me."

"You'll have a doctor tonight when the boat comes out."

"I don't want to wait for no boat."

"All right," the man said. "We're going to dump this liquor now."

He started to dump it and it was hard work one-handed. A sack of liquor only weighs about forty pounds but he had not dumped very many of them before he became dizzy again. He sat down in the cockpit and then he lay down.

"You going to kill yourself," the nigger said.

The man lay quietly in the cockpit with his head against one of the sacks.

The branches of the mangroves had come into the cockpit and they made a shadow over him where he lay. He could hear the wind above the mangroves and looking out at the high, cold sky see the thin brown clouds of the norther.

"Nobody going to come out with this breeze," he thought. "They won't look for us to have started with this blowing."

"You think they'll come out?" the nigger asked.

"Sure," the man said. "Why not?"

"It's blowing too hard."

"They're looking for us."

"Not with it like this. What you want to lie to me for?" The nigger was talking with his mouth almost against a sack.

"Take it easy, Wesley," the man told him.

"Take it easy, the man says," the nigger went on. "Take it easy. Take what easy? Take dyin' like a dog easy? You got me here. Get me out."

"Take it easy," the man said, kindly.

"They ain't coming," the nigger said. "I know they ain't coming. I'm cold I tell you. I can't stand this pain and cold I tell you."

The man sat up feeling hollow and unsteady. The nigger's eyes watched him as he rose on one knee, his right arm dangling, took the hand of his right arm in his left hand and placed it between his knees and then pulled himself up by the plank nailed above the gunwale until he stood, looking down at the nigger, his right hand still held between his thighs. He was thinking that he had never really felt pain before.

"If I keep it out straight, pulled out straight, it don't hurt so bad," he said.

"Let me tie it up in a sling," the nigger said.

"I can't make a bend in the elbow," the man said. "It stiffened that way."

"What we goin' to do?"

"Dump this liquor," the man told him. "Can't you put over what you can reach, Wesley?"

The nigger tried to move to reach a sack, then groaned and lay back.

"Do you hurt that bad, Wesley?"

"Oh God," the nigger said.

"You don't think once you moved it it wouldn't hurt so bad?"

"I'm shot," the nigger said. "I ain't going to move. The man wants me to go to dumpin' liquor when I'm shot."

"Take it easy."

"You say that once more I go crazy."

"Take it easy," the man said quietly.

The nigger made a howling noise and shuffling with his hands on the deck picked up the whetstone from under the coaming.

"I'll kill you," he said. "I'll cut your heart out."

"Not with no whetstone," the man said. "Take it easy, Wesley."

The nigger blubbered with his face against a sack. The man went on slowly lifting the sacked packages of liquor and dropping them over the side. While he was dumping the liquor he heard the sound of a motor and looking he saw a boat headed toward them coming down the channel around the end of the key. It was a white boat with a buff painted house and a windshield.

"Boat coming," he said. "Come on Wesley."

"I can't."

"I'm remembering from now on," the man said. "Before was different."

"Go ahead an' remember," The nigger told him. "I ain't forgot nothing either."

Working fast now, the sweat running down his face, not stopping to watch the boat coming slowly down the channel, the man picked up the sacked packages of liquor with his good arm and dropped them over the side.

"Roll over." He reached for the package under the nigger's head and swung it over the side. The nigger raised himself up and looked.

"Here they are," he said. The boat was almost abeam of them.

"It's Captain Willie," the nigger said. "With a party."

In the stern of the white boat two men in flannels and white cloth hats sat in fishing chairs trolling and an old man in a felt hat and a windbreaker held the tiller and steered the boat close past the mangroves where the booze boat lay.

"What you say, Harry?" the old man called as he passed. The man called Harry waved his good arm in reply. The boat went on past, the two men who were fishing looking toward the booze boat and talking to the old man. Harry could not hear what they were saying.

"He'll make a turn at the mouth and come back," Harry said to the Negro. He went below and came up with a blanket. "Let me cover you up."  
" 'Bout time you cover me up. They couldn't help but see that liquor. What we goin' to do?"

"Willie's a good skate," the man said. "He'll tell them in town we're out here. Those fellows fishing ain't going to bother us. What they care about us?"

He felt very shaky now and he sat down on the steering seat and held his right arm tight between his thighs. His knees were shaking and with the shaking he could feel the ends of the bone in his upper arm grate. He opened his knees, lifted his arm out, and let it hang by his side. He was sitting there, his arm hanging, when the boat passed them coming back up the channel. The two men in the fishing chairs were talking. They had put up their rods and one of them was looking at them through a pair of glasses. They were too far out for him to hear what they were saying. It would not have helped him if he had heard it.

On board the charter boat South Florida, trolling down the Woman Key channel because it was too rough to go out to the reef, Captain Willie Adams was thinking. So Harry crossed last night. That boy's got cojones. He must have got that whole blow. She's a sea boat all right. How you suppose he smashed his windshield? Damned if I'd cross a night like last night. Damned if I'd ever run liquor from Cuba. They bring it all from Mariel now! Just go in and out. It's supposed to be wide open. "What's that you say, Cap?"

"What boat is that?" asked one of the men in the fishing chairs.

"That boat?"

"Yes, that boat."

"Oh that's a Key West boat."

"What I said was, whose boat is it?"

"I wouldn't know that, Cap."

"Is the owner a fisherman?"

"Well, some say he is."

"What do you mean?"

"He does a little of everything."

"You don't know his name?"

"No sir."

"You called him Harry."

"Not me."

"I heard you call him Harry."

Captain Willie Adams took a good look at the man who was speaking to him. He saw a high-cheekboned, thin-lipped, slightly pudgy face with deep set grey eyes and a contemptuous mouth looking at him from under a canvas hat. There was no way that Captain Willie Adams could know that this man was regarded as irresistibly handsome by a great many women in Washington.

"I must have called him that by mistake," Captain Willie said.

"You can see that the man is wounded, Doctor," the other man said, handing the glasses to his companion.  
"I can see that without glasses," the man addressed as Doctor said. "Who is that man?"  
"I wouldn't know," said Captain Willie.  
"Well, you will know," the man with the contemptuous mouth said. "Write down the numbers on the bow."

"I have them. Doctor."  
"We'll go over and have a look," the Doctor said.  
"Are you a doctor?" Captain Willie asked.  
"Not of medicine," the grey-eyed man told him.

"If you're not a medical doctor I wouldn't go over there."  
"Why not?"  
"If he wanted us he would have signaled us. If he don't want us it's none of our business. Down here everybody aims to mind their own business."

"All right. Suppose you mind yours then. Take us over to that boat." Captain Willie continued on his way up the channel, the two-cylinder Palmer coughing steadily.  
"Didn't you hear me?"  
"Yes sir."  
"Why don't you obey my order?"

"Who the hell you think you are?" asked Captain Willie.  
"That's not the question. Do as I tell you."  
"Who do you think you are?" Captain Willie asked again.  
"All right. For your information I'm one of the three most important men in the United States today."  
"What the hell you doing in Key West then?"

The other man leaned forward. "He's —", he said impressively.  
"I never heard of him," said Captain Willie.  
"Well, you will," said the man called Doctor. "And so will everyone in this stinking jerkwater little town if I have to grub it out by the roots."

"You're a nice fellow," said Captain Willie. "How did you get so important?"  
"He's the most intimate friend and closest adviser of —", said the other man.  
"Nuts," said Captain Willie. "If he's all that what's he doing in Key West?"  
"He's just here for a rest," the secretary explained. "He's going to be—  
—."

"That's enough, Harris," the man called Doctor said. "Now will you take us over to that boat," he said smiling. He had a smile which was reserved for such occasions.  
"No sir."  
"Listen you half-witted fisherman. I'll make life so miserable for you—"  
"Yes," said Captain Willie.  
"You don't know who I am."  
"None of it don't mean anything to me," said Captain Willie. "And you don't know where you are."  
"That man is a bootlegger, isn't he?"

"What do you think?"

"There's probably a reward for him."

"I doubt that."

"He's a lawbreaker."

"He's got a family and he's got to eat and feed them. Who the hell do you eat off of with people working here in Key West for the Government for six dollars and a half a week?"

"He's wounded. That means he's been in trouble."

"Unless he shot hisself for fun."

"You can save that sarcasm. You're going over to that boat and we're going to take that man and that boat into custody."

"Into where?"

"Into Key West."

"Are you an officer?"

"I've told you who he is," the secretary said.

"All right," said Captain Willie. He pushed the tiller hard over and turned the boat, coming so close to the edge of the channel that the propeller threw up a circling cloud of marl.

He chugged down the channel toward where the other boat lay against the mangroves.

"Have you a gun aboard?" the man called the Doctor asked Captain Willie.

"No sir."

The two men in flannels were standing up now watching the booze boat.

"This is better fun than fishing, eh Doctor?" the secretary said.

"Fishing is nonsense," said the Doctor. "If you catch a sailfish what do you do with it? You can't eat it. This is really interesting. I'm glad to see this at first hand. Wounded as he is that man cannot escape. It's too rough at sea. We know his boat."

"You're really capturing him single-handed," said the secretary admiringly.

"And unarmed too," said the Doctor.

"With no G-men nonsense," said the secretary.

"Edgar Hoover exaggerates his publicity," said the Doctor. "I feel we've given him about enough rope." Then, "Pull alongside," he said to Captain Willie.

Captain Willie threw out his clutch and the boat drifted.

"Hey," Captain Willie called to the other boat. "Keep your heads down."

"What's that?" the Doctor said angrily.

"Shut up," said Captain Willie. "Hey," he called over to the other boat.

"Listen. Get on into town and take it easy. Never mind the boat. They'll take the boat. Dump your load and get into town. I got a guy here on board, some kind of a stool from Washington. Not a G-man. Just a stool. One of the heads of the alphabet. More important than the President, he says. He wants to pinch you. He thinks you're a bootlegger. He's got the numbers of the boat. I ain't never seen you so I don't know who you are. I couldn't identify you—"

The boats had drifted apart. Captain Willie went on shouting, "I don't know where this place is where I seen you. I wouldn't know how to get back here."

"O.K.," came a shout from the booze boat.

"I'm taking this big alphabet man fishing until dark," Captain Willie shouted.

"O.K."

"He loves to fish," Captain Willie yelled, his voice almost breaking. "But the son of a bitch claims you can't eat 'em."  
"Thanks brother," came the voice of Harry.  
"That chap your brother?" asked the Doctor, his face very red but his love for information still unappeased.

"No sir," said Captain Willie. "Most everybody goes in boats calls each other brother."  
"We'll go into Key West," the Doctor said; but he said it without great conviction.  
"No sir," said Captain Willie. "You gentlemen chartered me for a day. I'm going to see you get your money's worth. You called me a halfwit but I'll see you get a full day's charter."  
"He's an old man," said the Doctor to his secretary. "Should we rush him?"

"Don't you try it," said Captain Willie. "I'd hit you right over the head with this."  
He showed them a length of iron pipe that he used for clubbing shark.

"Why don't you gentlemen just put your lines out and enjoy yourselves? You didn't come down here to get in no trouble. You come down here for a rest. You say you can't eat sailfish but you won't catch no sailfish in these channels. You'd be lucky to catch a grouper."

"What do you think?" asked the Doctor.  
"Better leave him alone." The secretary eyed the iron pipe.

"Besides you made another mistake," Captain Willie went on. "Sailfish is just as good eating as kingfish. When we used to sell them to Rios for the Havana market we got ten cents a pound same as kings."  
"Oh shut up," said the Doctor.

"I thought you'd be interested in these things as a Government man. Ain't you mixed up in the prices of things that we eat or something? Ain't that it? Making them more costly or something. Making the grits dearer and the grunts cheaper. Fish goin' down in price all the time."

"Oh shut up," said the Doctor.  
On the booze boat Harry had the last sack over.  
"Get me the fish knife," he said to the nigger.  
"It's gone."

Harry pressed the self-starters and started the engines. He got the hatchet and with his left hand chopped the anchor rope through against the bit. It'll sink and they'll grapple it when they pick up the load, he thought. I'll run her up into the Garrison Bight and if they're going to take her they'll take her. I got to get to a doctor. I don't want to lose my arm and the boat both. The load is worth as much as the boat. There wasn't too much of it smashed. A little smashed can smell plenty.

He shoved the port clutch in and swung out away from the mangroves with the tide. The engines ran smoothly. Captain Willie's boat was two miles away now headed for Boca Grande. I guess the tide's high enough to go through the lakes now, Harry thought. He shoved in his starboard clutch and the engines roared as he pushed up the throttle. He could feel her bow rise and the green mangroves coasted swiftly alongside as the boat sucked the water away from their roots. I hope they don't take her, he thought.



I hope they can fix my arm. How was we to know they'd shoot at us in Mariel after we could go and come there open for six months? That's Cubans for you. Somebody didn't pay somebody so we got the shooting. That's Cubans all right.

"Hey Wesley," he said, looking back into the cockpit where the nigger lay with the blanket over him. "How you feeling, Boogie?"

"God," said Wesley. "I couldn't feel no worse."

"You'll feel worse when the old doctor probes for it," Harry told him.

"You ain't human," the nigger said. "You ain't got human feelings."

That old Willie is a good skate, Harry was thinking. There's a good skate, that old Willie. We done better to come in than to wait. It was foolish to wait. I felt so dizzy and sicklike I lost my judgment.

Ahead now he could see the white of the La Concha hotel, the wireless masts, and the houses of town. He could see the car ferries lying at the Trumbo dock where he would go around to head up for the Garrison Bight. That old Willie, he thought. He was giving them hell. Wonder who those buzzards was? Damn if I don't feel plenty bad right now. I feel plenty dizzy. We done right to come in. We done right not to wait.

"Mr. Harry," said the nigger. "I'm sorry I couldn't help dump that stuff."

"Hell," said Harry. "Ain't no nigger any good when he's shot. You're a all right nigger, Wesley."

Above the roar of the motors and the high, slapping rush of the boat through the water he felt a strange hollow singing in his heart. He always felt this way coming home at the end of a trip. I hope they can fix that arm, he thought. I got a lot of use for that arm.

The End