

Hancock Harrie Irving

**The Motor Boat Club and The
Wireless: or, the Dot, Dash and
Dare Cruise**



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CHAPTER I

A SPARK PUTS THREE BOYS AND A BOAT ON THE JUMP

“Ho, ho, ho – hum!” grumbled Hank Butts, vainly trying to stifle a prodigious yawn. “This may be what Mr. Seaton calls a vacation on full pay, but I’d rather work.”

“It *is* fearfully dull, loafing around, in this fashion, on a lonely island, yet in plain sight of the sea that we long to rove over,” nodded Captain Tom Halstead of the motor yacht “Restless.”

“Yet Hank just put us in mind of the fact that we’re getting paid for our time,” laughed Joe Dawson, the least restless of the trio of young Motor Boat Club boys.

“Oh it’s all right on the pay end,” agreed Hank, readily. “But just think of a young fellow, full of life and hope, with a dozen ambitions and a hustling nature, taking up with a job of this kind!”

“What kind of job?” inquired Captain Tom.

“The job of being bored,” answered Butts, solemnly. “I could have had that kind of job back on Long Island.”

“Without the pay,” amended Joe Dawson, with another quiet smile.

“But ten days of being bored *does* grow rather wearisome, even with the pay for a solace,” agreed Tom Halstead.

Ting-ling-ling! The soft jangling of a bell from one of the rooms of the seashore bungalow, on the porch of which the boys sat, broke in on them.

“Hurrah, Joe! Hustle and get that message,” begged Hank, almost sitting up straight in the porch chair, with a comical pretense of excitement. “It’s sure to be from Mr. Seaton this time.”

“Likely,” grinned Joe, as he rose and crossed the porch in leisurely fashion. The jangling of the bell continued. The bell was a rather clumsy, yet sufficing device that young Dawson had attached to the wireless telegraph apparatus.

For, though this bungalow on a little island southwest of Beaufort, North Carolina, had an appearance of being wholly out of the world, yet the absent owner, Mr. Powell Seaton, had contrived to put his place very much “in the world” by installing wireless telegraphy at the bungalow. On the premises was operated a complete electrical plant that furnished energy enough to send messages for hundreds of miles along the coast.

For Joe, the mechanical genius of the Motor Boat Club, had always had a passion for telegraphy. Of late he had gone in in earnest for the wireless kind, and had rapidly mastered its most essential details.

The bell told when electrical waves were rushing through the air at marvelous speed, though it did not distinguish between any general wave and the special call for this bungalow station, which was by the letters “CBA.”

When Joe Dawson went into the room under the tall aerials that hung from the mast, he expected to listen only to some message not in the least intended for this station.

Seating himself by the relay, with its Morse register close at hand, Joe Dawson picked up and adjusted the head-band with its pair of watch-case receivers. He then hastily picked up a pencil, shoved a pad of paper close under his hand and listened.

All this he did with a dull, listless air. He had not the slightest forewarning of the great jolt that was soon to come to himself and his comrades out of the atmosphere.

The call, whatever it was, had ended. Yet, after a pause of a few seconds, it began to sound again. Joe's listless air vanished as the new set of dots and dashes came in, clamoring in clicking haste against his ear drums.

"To Every Wireless Station – Urgent!" ran the first few words. Joe's nimble fingers pushed his pencil, recording letter after letter until these words were down. Then, dropping his pencil for the sending key, young Dawson transmitted a crashing electric impulse into the air, flashing through space over hundreds of miles the station signal, "CBA."

"Have you a fast, seaworthy boat within immediate call?" came back out of the invisible distance over the ocean.

"A twenty-six-mile sea-going motor boat right at the pier here," Joe flashed back, again adding his signature, "CBA."

"Good!" came back the answer. "Then listen hard – act quick – life at stake!"

Joe Dawson not only listened. His thoughts flew with the dots and dashes of the wireless message; his right hand rushed the pencil in recording all of that wonderful message as it came to him. It was tragedy that Dawson wrote down at the dictation of this impatient operator far out on the Atlantic highways. Almost in the midst of it came a feverish break-in from land, and another hand was playing in the great game of life and death, fame and dishonor, riches and intrigue. All was being unfolded by means of the unseen, far-reaching wireless telegraph.

As Joe listened, wrote, and occasionally broke in to send a few words, the dew of cold perspiration stood out on his brow. His fingers trembled. With a great effort of the will this motor boat boy steadied his nerves and muscles in order to see through to the end this mysterious thing coming out of space.

While this was going on, Joe Dawson did not call out to either of his comrades. With an instinct that worked as fast as the wireless messages themselves, young Dawson chose to put off calling the other motor boat boys until he had the whole startling tale to tell them – until he had in complete form the coming orders that would send all three of them and the "Restless" on a tireless sea-chase.

While this flood of dots and dashes is coming in from seaward, and from landward, it is well that the reader be put in possession of some information that will make clearer to him the nature of the dramatic events that followed this sudden in-pouring of wireless messages to the little "CBA" bungalow station on this island off the North Carolina coast.

Readers of the preceding volume of this series, "The Motor Boat Club Off Long Island," will at once recall that story, throbbing with the interest of human life – will remember how faithfully and wisely Tom Halstead, Joe Dawson and Hank Butts, all members of the Motor Boat Club, served that leader in Wall Street finance, Francis Delavan, and the latter's nervous, wavering friend, Eben Moddridge. To such former readers the tale is familiar of how the Motor Boat Club boys aided materially in frustrating a great conspiracy in finance, aimed against their employer. Saved from ruin by the grit, keenness and loyalty of these three members of the Motor Boat Club, Messrs. Delavan and Moddridge had handsomely rewarded the boys for their signal services.

As Hank Butts preferred, for family reasons, to spend his summers, and much of his other time, on Long Island, he had been presented with a thirty-foot launch, a shore lot at East Hampton, and a "shack" and pier. Tom Halstead and Joe Dawson, fast friends and both from the same little Kennebec River village, preferring always the broad ocean, had been made the owners of the "Soudan," a fine, sea-going, fifty-five foot motor cruising yacht built for deep sea work. Though the "Soudan" had a very comfortable beam of fifteen feet, she was nevertheless equipped with twin gasoline motors that could send her over the waters at some twenty-five or twenty-six miles an hour.

With the gift of the boat to Tom and Joe came also a present of money enough to make the two new young owners able to put her in commission and keep her going for awhile.

It was not intended by Messrs. Delavan and Moddridge that Tom Halstead and Joe Dawson should be able to keep their new prize and property running for their own pleasure. On the contrary the givers of this splendid present believed that the two boys would ply under charter for wealthy pleasure seekers, thus making a splendid living. In summer there were the northern waters; in winter the southern waters. Thus it was believed that Captain Tom Halstead and Engineer Joe Dawson would be in a position to earn a handsome income from their boat the year around. At any time, should they so choose, they could sell the boat.

Sell her? It would almost have broken honest, impulsive, loyal Tom Halstead's heart to sell this precious boat! Joe Dawson, quiet though he was, would have flown into a rage at any suggestion of his parting with his interest in the handsome, capable little craft!

The owners had re-christened the boat the "Restless." Within ten days after the boys had left the employ of Mr. Delavan, Captain Tom had encountered Mr. Powell Seaton in New York. A few hours after that meeting the boys had had their boat chartered for at least the month of September. Then, after receiving their orders, they proceeded south to their present location on Lonely Island, five miles off the mainland. They were accompanied by Hank Butts, who had left his small boat in other hands and accepted temporary employment on the "Restless."

The island possessed an area of about half a square mile. The bungalow itself, a shed that was used as an electric power station, and a third building that contained a telescope and some other astronomical apparatus were the sole interesting features of this island.

After the chartering, and the payment of half the hire-money in advance for the month, not one of these Motor Boat Club boys had laid eyes on Mr. Powell Seaton. After cruising down from New York, and taking possession of the bungalow, as ordered, they had remained there ten whole days, idle and wondering. Idle, that is, except for running the electric power plant as much as was needed, making their own beds and doing their own cooking.

For what purpose had Powell Seaton wanted them and the "Restless"? Now, as Dawson's active fingers pushed the pencil through the mazes of recorded messages, that active-minded young man began to get a glimpse.

"Sounds like something big, Joe," smiled Captain Tom, his eyes twinkling under the visor of his uniform cap as he thrust his head in through the doorway.

"It is," muttered Joe, in a low but tense voice. "Just wait. I've got one to send."

His fingers moved busily at the key for a little while. Then, snatching up the sheets of paper on which he had written, Joe Dawson leaped to his feet in such haste that he sent the chair spinning across the room.

Such impulsiveness in Dawson was so utterly unusual that Captain Tom Halstead gasped.

"Come on!" called Joe, darting to the door. "Down to the boat!"

"Where—?" began Tom Halstead, but he got only as far as that word, for Joe shot back:

"To sea!"

"How—" again essayed Halstead.

"At full speed – the fastest we can travel!" called back Joe, who was leaping down the porch steps.

"Any time to lock up?" demanded Tom, half-laughingly.

"Yes – but hustle! I'll get the motor started and be waiting."

Hank Butts was leaning indolently against one of the porch posts.

"Look at old Joe sailing before a fair wind," he laughed, admiringly.

"Turn to, Hank! Help lock the windows and the doors – full speed ahead!" directed Captain Tom, with vigor. "Joe Dawson never goes off at racing speed like that unless he has his orders and knows what he's doing."

“I thought you were the captain,” grinned Hank, as he sprang to obey.

“So I am,” Halstead shot at the other boy. “But, just as it happens, Joe has the sailing orders – and he can be trusted with ’em. Now – everything is tight and the keys in my pocket. For the dock, on the run!”

Chug-chug! Joe had surely been moving, for, by the time the other boys reached the dock, Dawson had the hatchway of the motor room open and the twin motors had begun to move. The young engineer, an oil-can in hand, was watching the revolutions of the two handsome machines.

“Stand by the stern-line to throw off, Hank,” called Captain Tom, as he raced out onto the dock and made a plunge for the bow hawser. With this in hand he sprang aboard.

“How soon, Joe?” called the young skipper, throwing the canvas cover from the wheel down onto the bridge deck.

“As soon as you like,” was Joe’s answer, as he threw more speed into the twin motors.

Hank had the stern hawser in his hands by this time. Halstead threw the wheel over slightly, warping the boat’s graceful bow away from the dock under just a touch of speed ahead.

“Come aboard, Hank!” called the young skipper. As soon as Butts had obeyed with a flying leap, Tom rang for half speed ahead, moving smoothly out of the little sand-bound harbor.

“Coil the hawsers, Hank,” directed the young skipper. “Put the wheel cover away. Then relieve Joe. I want to hear from him.”

These three separate orders Hank had executed within less than two minutes, and jumped down into the motor room. Joe came on deck, holding the sheets of paper in his hand.

“Now, let’s understand what the business is, anyway,” suggested Tom Halstead. “Who signaled us? Mr. Seaton?”

“Yes, but he wasn’t the first one,” Dawson answered. “The first hail came from out of the sea, from the Black B liner, ‘Constant,’ addressed to any wireless station and tagged ‘urgent.’ Here it is.”

One hand on the wheel, the young skipper received the sheet held out to him. It read:

Can you send fast boat instantly to take off badly injured passenger for medical treatment? Passenger A. B. Clodis, believed to be wealthy man from New York, discovered unconscious, perhaps dying, from fall. Fractured skull. Believe passenger or family to be able to pay handsomely for services.

(Signed) Hampton, captain.

“Here’s another sheet giving the ship’s position at that moment,” Joe continued; “also her course and speed.”

“And you answered?” demanded Halstead.

“Just as I started to, the wireless at Beaufort broke in. It seems that Mr. Seaton is at Beaufort, and that he heard, at once, of the trouble. Here is Mr. Seaton’s order.”

Joe Dawson held out another sheet, on which he had transcribed this wireless message:

Halstead, Lonely Island: Clodis is my man on important matter. Get him off ship, and with all speed. Take him to Lonely Island, where I will arrive with surgeons and nurses. Get all his baggage and papers off with him, and take greatest care of same. Whole thing plotted by enemies. If they succeed it spells ruin for me and more than one tragedy. I depend on you boys; don’t fail me! Act at full speed.

(Signed) Powell Seaton.

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“That comes from Mr. Seaton, all right,” nodded Captain Tom. “That’s his private signal, below his name, that he told us to look for on all orders of his. Now, let me have a look again at the position and course of the ‘Constant.’”

After studying the dispatch intently, Captain Halstead nodded to his chum to take the wheel. Facing about, Tom swung open the small chart-case secured to the top of the deck-house. With a small, accurate pocket rule he made some measurements.

“At twenty-five miles an hour, Joe, if you can keep it up, a straight sou’east by east course should bring us right in the path of the ‘Constant’ on the course and speed she reports.”

“Oh, we can keep the speed up,” predicted Joe, confidently. “But I can’t fool with the engine, unless you insist. I ought to be back in the cabin, at the wireless instrument.”

“Hank can keep at the motors, then,” nodded Captain Tom. “Go along, old fellow.”

Joe paused but an instant to give Hank the needed orders, then raced aft. At the after end of the cabin were two snug little staterooms; at the other end, forward, a table had been fitted up with wireless apparatus, for the twin motors of the boat generated, by means of a dynamo, electricity enough for a very respectable wireless spark.

Hardly had Joe vanished when Hank, satisfied with the performance of the motors, appeared on deck. The signal mast stood just behind the bridge deck. It was of light, hollow steel, with two inner tubes that, when extended, made an unusually high mast for such a boat.

“We can run the extension mast up to full height in this light breeze, can’t we, Tom?” asked the Long Island boy. Halstead nodded.

So simple was the arrangement that, within a few moments, Hank had the aerials well aloft. Nor was he too soon, for this query came promptly through space from Powell Seaton, up at Beaufort:

“Are you starting at once?”

With a quiet grin, all alone there by the wireless apparatus, young Dawson sparked back through the air:

“Three miles east, and running to intercept the ‘Constant.’”

“Good!” came clicking into Joe Dawson’s watch-case receivers against his ears, a moment later. “Then I won’t bother you further. I trust you. But, oh, if you should fail! You don’t know what failure means – to me!”

All this, of course, was clicked out in the dot and dash code of the Morse alphabet, but to Joe Dawson it was as plain as words spoken by the human voice.

“You’re right, Mr. Seaton.” Joe’s busy right hand fingers clicked out the message on the sending key, while the electric waves sped from the aerials aloft outside. “We don’t know what ‘failure’ means. We won’t fail you. Good-bye.”

Then Joe turned his attention to the “Constant.” The big Black B liner answered promptly. She was on the same course, and glad to know that the “Restless” was speeding over the sea to seek her.

Having finished in raising the extended signal mast, and glancing into the motor room to see that the motors were running smoothly, Hank leaned against the raised deck top. The Long Island boy was hardly to be expected as a member of the crew of the “Restless” on this cruise, but he had wound up the summer season at East Hampton, and now, with idle September coming upon him, he had found the longing for the broad sea too powerful for him. Family conditions at home being satisfactory, he had promised himself this one month away from home, and was aboard as steward and general helper.

“I wonder if our work for Mr. Seaton has started in earnest?” ventured Hank.

“It has, for a few hours to-day, anyway,” smiled Captain Tom. “We’re cruising at full speed, and under orders from the man who chartered the ‘Restless’ for this month.”

“But who can this Clodis be?”

“I don’t know,” Tom Halstead admitted.

“I wonder why Mr. Seaton is so mightily interested in him? What does Seaton mean by hinting at ruin and tragedies?”

“Do you know what I think, Hank?” queried the young skipper, quietly.

“What?”

“I think it would be downright impudence on our part to get too inquisitive about the affairs of the man who employs us. We looked Mr. Seaton up, and found he had the reputation of being an honest man. That’s as much of his business as we have any right to want to know.”

Hank colored, though he went on, in an argumentative way:

“I s’pose that’s all true enough, Tom. Still, it’s human nature, when you smell a big mystery, to want to know the meaning of at least some of it. And I’m mighty curious, because I scent something unusually big in the air.”

“So do I,” admitted the young skipper, giving the wheel another turn in order to hold the fast-moving boat to her course.

“Then what—”

“Hold on, Hank! Don’t be downright nose-y. And, as for guessing—”

“Why, Seaton as good as hints that there’s been a downright attempt to kill this man Clodis,” broke in Hank, who could not be repressed easily. “And Seaton is surely mightily worked up about it. And sending us out to take a passenger off a steamer bound for South America! Tom, do you s’pose that criminals are—”

“Hank,” broke in the young skipper, half-severely, “there’s something squeaking on one of the motors. For goodness’ sake don’t let us break down on what we’ve been told is a life-and-death trip! Get below and see what’s wrong. Stand by to watch the performance of the motors.”

Hank vanished, inwardly grumbling, for his curiosity was doing two hours’ work every minute.

Captain Tom, after measuring on the chart, had figured on meeting the “Constant” in two hours and twenty minutes. Now, at every turn of the twin shafts the young skipper’s blood bounded with the desire to do his full duty in arriving on time. Yet there was not wanting pleasure, mixed with the anxiety. How good the fresh, salty air tasted, out here on the broad sea, with the low coast-line already nearly out of sight! Tom Halstead sniffed in breath after breath. His eyes danced as they beheld the spraying of white water cut and turned up by the boat’s fast prow. Oh, it was great to be out here on the deep, one hand guiding the course of one of the nimblest yachts afloat!

Joe, as he came forward, felt this same wild exhilaration. Quiet, dutiful and law-abiding as both these Motor Boat Club boys were, there must have been much of the old Norseman Viking blood in their veins, for this swift dash over the rolling swell of the ocean was like a tonic to them both.

“Say, isn’t it all grand?” demanded Joe, his cheeks glowing, as he paused on the bridge deck, taking in great whiffs of the purest air supplied to man.

“Great!” admitted Skipper Tom, in a tone that was almost a cheer. Then he asked, gravely:

“Any news?”

“Mr. Seaton knows we have started, and expresses his pleasure. I’ve signaled the ‘Constant,’ and she’s still keeping to the same course, and will so continue.”

“And the patient, Clodis?”

“Still alive, Tom; but the ship’s surgeon offers no hope, and will be glad to have us take him onto the ‘Restless.’”

“It must be something terrible to make Mr. Seaton so anxious about the man,” observed Tom, thoughtfully.

“Yes,” nodded Joe. Then: “Say, Tom, I’ve just struck an easy scheme for connecting one of the armatures of the Morse register, aft, to a buzzer in the engine room. Then if I happen to be in the engine room when wireless messages are traveling through the air I shall know it.”

In the next hour all three of the boys, though they did not talk much about it, were wondering about this tragedy of the deep sea that had called them into action. Though they could not as yet

guess it, this present affair of theirs was but the start of a series of adventures more amazing than any they had ever dreamed of. Now, at the most, they were curious. Soon they were to know what it meant to be astounded; they were soon to know what it felt like to feel haunted, to find themselves assailed by dread after dread. Undoubtedly it was merciful for them that they could not, at this moment, peer behind the curtain of the immediate future.

So, ignorant of what fate and destiny held in store for them, they were mainly intent, now, upon intercepting at the right point the big liner cruising swiftly southward.

In another hour they made out smoke on the horizon where Skipper Tom judged the “Constant” to be. Later the spars of the steamship were visible through the marine glasses. Then the hull appeared. A few minutes later Captain Tom ran the “Restless” dashing in alongside the great black hull of the liner, along whose starboard rail a hundred or more passengers had gathered.

Turning the wheel over to Hank, Captain Tom Halstead snatched up the megaphone as the larger vessel slowed down.

“‘Constant,’ ahoy!” bellowed the young skipper. “This is the yacht ‘Restless,’ sent to receive your injured passenger, Clodis.”

“‘Restless’ ahoy!” came the response from the liner’s bridge. “We’ll lower our starboard side gangway, if you can come alongside safely.”

The Motor Boat Club boys were at the threshold of their strangest, wildest succession of adventures!

CHAPTER II

SOME OF THE MYSTERY UNRAVELED

"If we can come alongside safely," echoed Hank, disgustedly. "I'll show 'em – and in a smooth swell of sea like this, too!"

As the big steamship lay to, Hank steered in until Captain Tom, boathook in hand, made fast temporarily. Then Hank hurried up with a line with which he took a fast hitch.

"Hey, there, you'll pull away our side gangway," roared down a mate, whose head and uniform cap showed over the rail above.

"You don't know us," grinned Joe Dawson, quietly.

By this time Tom Halstead was running lightly up the steps of the gangway. He reached the small platform above, then passed to the deck.

He was met by Captain Hampton, who inquired:

"Where's your sailing master, young man?"

"Right before you, Captain."

"You?"

"Yes, sir."

"Who are your owners?" demanded Captain Hampton, much astonished by Tom's quiet assurance.

"I'm captain and half-owner of the 'Restless,' sir," Halstead continued, still smiling at the other captain's very evident astonishment. "The other owner is the engineer, Joe Dawson, my chum."

Captain Hampton swallowed something very hard. Several of the passengers were smiling. A man who has followed the sea for years knows the capacity and efficiency that boys often display on shipboard, but it is unusual to find a boy acting as master of a yacht.

However, there was the "Restless," and there was Tom Halstead in the captain's uniform. These were facts that could not be disputed.

"You have a passenger, a Mr. Clodis, that you want to have me take off?" resumed Tom.

"Yes; you have come for him, then?"

"Not only that, but Mr. Seaton, the gentleman who has our boat in charter, has very urgently ordered us to bring Mr. Clodis ashore; also his baggage complete, and any and all papers that he may have brought aboard."

"You have a comfortable berth on your boat?"

"Several of them," Tom answered.

"Then I'll have some of my men make the transfer at once. Our ship's surgeon, Dr. Burke, will also go over the side and see that Mr. Clodis is made as comfortable as possible for his trip ashore."

"Steward Butts will show your men to the port stateroom, aft, sir."

A mate hurried away to give the order to Dr. Burke. A boatswain was directed to attend to having all of Mr. Clodis's baggage go over the side.

"Come to my stateroom, sir, if you please," requested Captain Hampton, and Tom followed.

"When you take a man with a fractured skull ashore, the authorities may want some explanation," declared the 'Constant's' sailing master, opening his desk. "Here is a statement, therefore, that I have prepared and signed. Take it with you, Captain—"

"Halstead," supplied Tom.

The motor boat boy glanced hurriedly through the document.

"I see you state it was an accident, Captain Hampton," went on Halstead, lowering his voice. "Our charter-man, Mr. Seaton, intimated that he believed it might have been a deliberate assault. Have you anything that you wish to say on this point, sir?"

"I don't believe it was an assault," replied the ship's master, musingly. Halstead's quick eye noted that Hampton appeared to be a sturdy, honest sea-dog. "Still, Captain Halstead, if you would like to question the steward who found Mr. Clodis at the foot of the main saloon companionway—"

"Have you made the investigation thoroughly, sir?"

"I think so – yes."

"Then nothing is likely to be gained, Captain, by my asking any questions of a steward you have already questioned."

The mate came back to report that Mr. Clodis had been carried over the side, and that his baggage had been taken aboard the "Restless."

"I know you don't want a liner held up," Tom went on, slipping Captain Hampton's report of the accident into his pocket. "I'll go over the side, sir, as soon as you can ascertain whether Mr. Clodis had any papers that ought to be sent ashore with him."

"There are none in the injured man's pockets," replied the steamship's sailing master, "and none were deposited with the purser. So, if there are any papers, they must be in Mr. Clodis's trunk or bag."

"Thank you, sir. Then I'll bid you good-bye and hurry over the side," said Halstead, energetically.

As they stepped out of the stateroom a passenger who had been lingering near stepped up.

"Oh, one moment," said Captain Hampton, suddenly. "Captain Halstead, this gentleman is Mr. Arthur Hilton. Since leaving New York he has received some wireless news that makes him anxious to return. He wants to go ashore with you."

Arthur Hilton had stepped forward, holding out his hand, which Tom took in his own. Mr. Hilton was a man of about thirty, smooth-faced, with firm set jaws. Though evidently not a Spaniard, he had the complexion usual to that race. His dark eyes were keen and sharp, though they had a rather pleasant look in them. He was slender, perhaps five feet eight inches tall, and, although his waist and legs were thin, he had broad, rather powerful looking shoulders.

"You can set me ashore, can't you, young man, for a ten-dollar bill?" inquired Hilton.

"Certainly, if Captain Hampton knows no reason why you shouldn't leave the vessel," Tom answered.

"Mr. Hilton has surrendered his passage ticket, and there is nothing to detain him aboard," replied the steamship's master.

"Your baggage ready, sir?" asked Tom.

"Nothing but this bag," laughed Hilton, stepping back and picking up his hand luggage.

"Come along, then, sir."

As Tom Halstead pressed his way through the throng of passengers gathered on deck, he heard several wondering, and some admiring, remarks relative to the youthfulness of the skipper of so handsome and trim a yacht.

Hilton followed the young skipper down over the side. Tom turned to help him to the deck of the "Restless," but Hilton lightly leaped across, holding his bag before him. Tom Halstead, as he turned, got a good look at that bag. It was one that he was likely to remember for many a day. The article was of dark red leather, and on one side the surface for a space as large as a man's hand had been torn away, probably in some accident.

"Here's the passage money, Captain," said Hilton, passing over a ten-dollar bill. Murmuring his thanks, the young skipper crumpled up the bill, shoving it into a trousers pocket, then hurried aft.

Clodis was a short, almost undersized man of perhaps forty-five, stout and well dressed. His head was so bandaged, as he lay in the lower berth of the port stateroom, that not much of his face was visible.

"He's unconscious, and probably will be for hours," stated Dr. Burke, as Captain Tom appeared in the doorway. "If he comes to, I've left some medicine with your steward, to be given the patient. Of course you'll get him ashore and under medical care as promptly as possible, Captain."

"Surgeons are on the way from Beaufort to meet us," the young skipper nodded.

"Then I'll return to my ship," declared Dr. Burke, rising. "But I'm glad to know that Mr. Clodis is going to be met by a friend."

As the doctor hurried over the side, Hilton turned to walk aft.

"Stay forward, if you please, sir," interposed Captain Tom. "No one is to go into the cabin until the patient has been removed under a doctor's orders."

There was a frown on Hilton's face, which, however, almost instantly vanished. Joe brought a deck arm chair and placed it for Mr. Hilton on the bridge deck.

"Good luck for you and your patient, sir," called down Captain Hampton over the rail, as he prepared to get under headway.

"Thank you, sir," Tom acknowledged. "We'll take the best care of Mr. Clodis that we know how."

With Hank on duty in the cabin, Tom Halstead had to cast off and make his own start as best he could. He managed the double task neatly, however, and, as he fell away the "Constant's" engine-room bell could be heard for half-speed-ahead.

The little auto-whistle of the "Restless" sounded shrilly, to be answered with a long, deep-throated blast from the liner's steam whistle. With this brief interchange of sea courtesies the two craft fell apart, going on their respective ways.

"Full speed on the return?" called Joe, from the doorway of the motor room.

"Yes," nodded Captain Tom. "But look out for vibration. Our sick man has had his skull cracked."

By the time the yacht had gone scooting for more than a mile over the waves, Captain Halstead, left hand on the wheel, turned to Hilton.

"Did you hear how our sick man came to be hurt, sir?"

"I didn't hear of it until a couple of hours after it happened," replied Hilton. "I understand that Mr. Clodis fell down the stairs leading to the main saloon, and was picked up unconscious. That was about all the word that was given out on board."

Captain Tom nodded, then gave his whole attention to making Lonely Island as speedily as possible. There was no land in sight, and the trip back was a long one. Yet the young skipper had his bearings perfectly.

They were still some eight miles off Lonely Island when Hilton roused himself at sight of a low-hulled, black schooner scudding north under a big spread of canvas.

"You're going to pass close to that boat, aren't you, Captain?" asked the bridge deck passenger.

"Yes, sir; pretty close."

"As I understand it, you're going to land at an island some miles off the coast, whereas I wish to reach the mainland at the earliest possible moment, and catch a railway train. So, Captain, if you'll signal that schooner and put me aboard, I shall feel under sufficient obligation to hand you another ten-dollar bill."

That looked so much like earning money rapidly that Halstead called Joe up from the motor room to set the signal. The schooner lay to until overtaken. Hilton discovered that the schooner was bound for Beaufort, and the bargain was quickly completed. A small boat put off from the sailing vessel and the bridge deck passenger, his noticeable bag included, was transferred.

The “Restless” was nearer Lonely Island, and the schooner was hull down, when Captain Tom suddenly started as Joe Dawson stepped upon deck.

“Blazes, Joe!” exclaimed the young skipper. “I’m afraid we’ve done it!”

“I’m afraid so, too,” came quietly from the young engineer.

“That fellow Hilton, so anxious to get ashore, may be the very chap who struck down Mr. Clodis!”

“The thought had just come to me,” admitted Joe.

“Yes! You know, Mr. Seaton hinted that the ‘accident’ might have been an attempt to kill.”

Captain and engineer of the “Restless” stared disconcertedly at each other.

“Now, why did I have to go and make such a fearful stumble as that?” groaned Tom.

“You didn’t, any more than I did,” Joe tried to console him.

“We should, at least, have kept Hilton aboard until Mr. Seaton had had a chance to look him over.”

“I could send a wireless to the Beaufort police to grab Hilton on landing,” suggested Joe, doubtfully, but Tom Halstead shook his head energetically.

“No; the Beaufort police wouldn’t do that on our say-so, Joe. And, even if they did, we might get ourselves into a lot of trouble.”

The “Restless” kept smoothly, swiftly on her way, bounding over the low, gentle swell of the calm ocean. Tom shivered whenever he thought of the possibility of the motors becoming cranky. With such important human freight aboard any mishap to the machinery would be extremely serious.

“Joe,” called Tom, at last, as the yacht came in sight of Lonely Island, “there’s a tug at our dock.”

Dawson came on deck, taking the marine glass from his chum’s hand.

“I guess Mr. Seaton has been hustling, then. He couldn’t have come from Beaufort on the tug, after all the trouble of rounding up doctors. He must have come down the shore in an automobile, and then engaged the tug near the island.”

As the “Restless” went closer, the tug, with two short toots of its whistle, moved out from the dock. Powell Seaton, in broad-brimmed hat and blue serge, waved his hand vigorously at the boys. With him stood three men, presumably surgeons. Captain Tom Halstead sounded three short blasts of the auto-whistle to signal the success of his errand, while Joe swung his uniform cap over his head.

“Get down to your engines, Joe,” called Captain Tom. “I’m going to make a swift landing that will be in keeping with Mr. Seaton’s impatience.”

Up to within nearly two hundred yards of the dock the “Restless” dashed in at full speed. Then signaling for half speed, next for the stop, and finally for the reverse, Captain Tom swung the yacht in almost a semi-circle, running up with bare headway so that the boat lay in gently against the string-piece. In that instant Tom, leaving the wheel, bounded up onto the dock, bow hawser in hand, and made the loop fast over the snubbing post. In the same instant Joe Dawson, cat-footed, raced aft, next leaping ashore with the stern hawser.

“Jove, but that was a beautiful bit of boat-handling – a superb piece of seamanship!” muttered one of the surgeons, admiringly.

Powell Seaton, however, stopped to hear none of this. He gripped Tom by the arm, demanding hoarsely:

“You brought Clodis ashore? How is he? Where?”

“Still unconscious, sir, and the ship’s doctor offered no hope. You will find your friend in the port stateroom, sir.”

Signing to the surgeons to accompany him, Mr. Seaton vanished aft, the medical men with him. Ten minutes passed before Hank came up, alone.

“What do the doctors say, Hank?” demanded Tom, instantly.

“One chance in about a million,” replied Hank, in a very subdued voice – for him.

Five minutes later Mr. Seaton, hat in hand, also came up on deck.

“Mr. Seaton,” murmured Tom, eagerly, “I’ve been waiting for you. I – we’ve something to tell you.” Then the young skipper detailed the affair of taking Arthur Hilton from the “Constant” and transferring him to the Beaufort-bound schooner.

“Describe the fellow!” commanded Powell Seaton, suddenly, hoarsely.

Captain Tom did so.

“Arthur Hilton he called himself, did he?” cried Mr. Seaton, in a rage. “Anson Dalton is the scoundrel’s real name!”

“Who is he, sir?” Tom asked, anxiously.

“Who is Anson Dalton?” cried Mr. Seaton, his voice sounding as though he were choking. “Who, but the scoundrel who has engineered this whole desperate plot against me! The dastard who struck down Allan Clodis! The knave who has striven for the badge of Cain!”

CHAPTER III

INVISIBLE HANDS AT THE WIRELESS

In a rear bedroom, the furthest apartment from the wireless room of the bungalow, Allan Clodis, barely alive, was placed when they bore him up from the boat. Then the three surgeons, retaining only Hank Butts, drove the others from the room.

“Back to the wireless!” breathed Seaton, tensely. “Dawson, get Beaufort on the jump.”

“I have the Beaufort operator,” reported Joe, after a few moments.

“Then rush this message, and ask the operator to get it in the hands of the chief of police without an instant’s loss of time,” directed Mr. Seaton, speaking in jerky haste.

The message described Anson Dalton, also the black schooner on which he had last been seen. The police chief was asked to arrest Dalton on sight, on the authority of Powell Seaton, and hold him for the United States authorities, for an attempt at homicide on an American ship on the high seas.

Within ten minutes back came the reply from Beaufort to this effect:

“I have men out watching for the schooner. Man Dalton will be arrested as you request. Will notify you.”

“Good!” cried Mr. Seaton, rubbing his hands vengefully. “Oh, Dalton, you scoundrel, you can’t escape us now, for long! You knew that, if you continued down the coast, there was danger that a United States revenue cutter would intercept the ship and take you off. At best, you knew you would be arrested at Rio Janeiro, if I suspected you, as I was bound to do. So you tried to steal ashore here, to be swallowed up in the mazes of this broad country at least an hour or two ahead of pursuit. And, but for the wireless spark that leaps through space, you could have done so. But we shall have you now.”

“Unless—” began Tom Halstead, hintingly, then paused.

“Unless – what?” insisted Mr. Seaton.

“Suppose Dalton is shrewd enough to pay the captain of the schooner to land him at some other point, where there is neither a policeman nor a telegraph station?”

Seaton made a noise that sounded as though he were grinding his teeth. Then he picked up a pencil, writing furiously.

“Send this to the police chief at Beaufort,” he ordered. Joe Dawson’s fingers made the sending-key sing. The message was one warning the police chief that Dalton might attempt to land at some point outside of Beaufort, and asking him to cover all near points along the coast. Mr. Seaton offered to make good any expense that this would entail.

Once more, in a few minutes, the answer was at hand.

“Chief of police at Beaufort says,” Joe translated the dots and dashes, “that his authority does not extend beyond the city limits.”

Again Mr. Seaton began to show signs of fury. Then, as though to force self-control, he trod softly out of the room, going toward the door of the sick-room, where Hank Butts stood guard.

“No news, sir; no change,” Hank reported, in an undertone.

“I’m afraid Mr. Seaton is pretty angry with us,” said Tom Halstead, gravely, “for allowing Hilton – Dalton, I mean – to get away from us.”

“Then he may as well get over it,” commented Joe Dawson, quietly. “We’re hired to furnish a boat, to sail it, and, incidentally, to run a wireless telegraph apparatus. We didn’t engage ourselves as policemen.”

"True," nodded young Captain Halstead. "Still, I might have done some quicker thinking. My! What would Dalton have felt like if I had run straight for this dock, refusing to put him aboard any other craft?"

"If you had tried to do that," retorted Joe, with another quiet smile, "do you know, Tom, what I think your friends would have been doing and saying of you?"

"No; of course not."

"Your friends would have been sending flowers, and bringing tears. They would be looking at you, to-morrow, and saying, in undertones: 'Goodness, how natural he looks!'"

Halstead was puzzled for a moment or two. Then, comprehending, he grinned, though he demanded:

"You think Dalton would have dared anything like that?"

"Well, you notice what kind of a rascal Mr. Seaton thinks Dalton is. And you know we don't go armed aboard the 'Restless.' Now, I'm pretty certain that Dalton could have displayed and used weapons if we had given him any cause to do so."

Ten minutes later, when Powell Seaton entered the room, he beheld Captain Tom Halstead seated at the operator's table, sealing an envelope that he had just directed.

"What are you doing, Captain?" asked the charter-man.

"You know that miserable twenty dollars that I took from Anson Dalton for passage money?" inquired Halstead, looking up.

"Yes."

"I've just enclosed the money in this envelope, with a note."

"Going to return the money to Dalton when you find his address?" smiled Mr. Seaton, wearily.

"No, sir," retorted Tom, in a voice sharp with disgust. "Dalton seems to have more money, already, than is good for him. I've addressed this envelope to a county institution down in the state that I come from."

"A public institution?"

"Yes, sir; the home for feeble-minded youth."

"Don't take it so hard as that, Halstead," urged Mr. Seaton. "Had you had a suspicion you would have done whatever lay in your power. I might have warned you against Dalton, but the truth is, I did not imagine he would be right on the scene."

Saying which, Powell Seaton walked away by himself. He was gravely, even sadly preoccupied. Though Captain Halstead could not even guess what the underlying mystery was, he knew that it seriously affected Mr. Seaton's plans and fortune. Their charter-man was worried almost past endurance, though bravely trying to hide the fact.

After the consultation of the surgeons, two of them departed aboard the tug, the third remaining to care for the patient. Hank, despite all his bluntness of manner, was proving himself valuable in the sick-room, while Joe spent most of his time in the wireless room of the bungalow, waiting to receive or send any word. So, as evening came, Tom Halstead bestirred himself with the preparation of the evening meal.

By dark there was a considerable wind blowing. Halstead left his cooking long enough to run down and make sure that all was snug and tight aboard the "Restless." The young skipper had fairly to fight his way against the wind on his return to the bungalow.

"There's going to be a tough old gale to-night," Tom muttered to himself, as he halted, a moment, on the porch, to study the weather conditions.

As yet, it was blowing only fairly hard. As the little group at the bungalow seated themselves at supper, however, the storm broke, with a deluge of rain and a sharp roar of thunder.

"This will bother wireless conditions to-night, won't it?" queried Mr. Seaton, as they ate.

"Some, perhaps, if the gale and the storm keep up," replied Joe Dawson. "But I imagine the worst of the gale is passing now."

And so it proved. An hour later the rain was falling steadily, though only in a drizzle. The wind had moderated a good deal.

As all hands, save Hank, sat in the sitting room of the bungalow, after the meal, the warning bell from the apparatus room suddenly tinkled.

"You see, sir," said Joe, rising quickly, "the wireless is still able to work."

He passed into the next room, seating himself by the instruments and slipping on the head-band that held the receivers.

"From Beaufort, sir," Joe said, presently, looking up. "The police report that no such schooner has landed at that city."

"Acknowledge the message of the police," directed Mr. Seaton, "and ask them not to give up the lookout through the night. Tell the chief of police that I'll gladly meet any expense that may be incurred."

Joe's right hand reached out for the sending-key. Then a blank look flashed across his face.

"Something wrong with the sending-key connections," he explained, in a low voice, leaping up. He examined the connections closely, yet, the more he looked, the more puzzled he became.

"The storage batteries can't have given out," he muttered, snatching up a lighted lantern. "But I'll go and look at them."

Out into the little dynamo shed he darted, followed by Powell Seaton and by Tom. The doctor was dozing in an arm-chair.

Joe gave two or three swift looks at the dynamo, the storage battery connections and other parts of the apparatus. Then his face went white with rage.

"Look here, Mr. Seaton," he panted, hoarsely. "There's been some infernal work here – someone else has been on the island, for none of our crowd would do such a trick! Not even in fun! Look, sir, at where the parts have been tampered with. Look where pliers have been used to cut the wire connections. See where these two bolts have been neatly removed with the help of wrenches. Look at—"

Joe paused, then glanced wildly around.

"Great Scott!" he groaned. "Just the parts removed that can't be replaced. The whole generating plant crippled! Mr. Seaton, until we get in touch with the mainland, and get some needed supplies there, we can't use this wireless plant again. We can receive messages – yes, up to any limit, but not a word can we send away from here."

"But who can have done this trick?" gasped Powell Seaton, looking as though amazement had numbed him, as, indeed, it almost had.

"Someone has landed here, since dark," broke in Tom Halstead, all a-quiver with dismay. "While we were at supper some sneak or sneaks have landed on this island. They have pried their way in here, and they've crippled our connection with the outside world."

"They could do it all easily enough, without making any noise," confirmed Joe. "Yes – they've done a splendid job, from a scoundrel's point of view!"

"Then you can't make this apparatus work for the sending of even a single message?" demanded Mr. Seaton.

"Not until we've landed some necessary repair and replacement materials from the mainland," replied Joe, with a disgusted shake of his head.

"But you can still send messages from the 'Restless,'" hinted Powell Seaton.

Tom Halstead bounded for the door of the dynamo shed with a sudden exclamation of dread.

"We can use the boat's wireless," nodded Joe, following, and speaking over his shoulder, "unless the same crowd of rascals have broken into the boat's motor room or cabin and played us the same trick there."

In the big sitting room, beside the large open fire-place, was a pile of long sticks of firewood. Tom Halstead stopped to snatch up one of these, and Joe quickly followed suit.

“I’ll go down to the boat with you, boys,” said Mr. Seaton, who had followed them. “If there’s anyone around to put up a fight you’ll want some help.”

But Captain Tom, acting, for the moment, as though he were aboard the yacht, suddenly took command.

“Mr. Seaton,” he said, “you’d better remain here to guard your unconscious friend. Doctor, wake up! Better go in and send Hank Butts out on the trot. We’ll take him with us.”

Dr. Cosgrove, awaking and realizing that something important was happening, swiftly moved off to the sick-room. Hank was speedily out with his comrades.

“If there are rascals on this island, who have designs against you, Mr. Seaton, then mount guard over your friend,” Tom added. “Better be in the sick-room at any moment when Dr. Cosgrove leaves there. Hank, get a club from that pile. Now, come along, fellows, and we’ll see what infernal mischief may have been done to the ‘Restless.’”

With that, the young skipper bounded out onto the porch, thence running down the board walk toward the dock.

Tom Halstead had some vague but highly uneasy notions as to the safety of his beloved boat. Yet, alarmed as he was, he was hardly prepared for the shock that met him when he arrived at the edge of the little wharf.

“Say, can you beat that?” panted young Halstead, halting, thunderstruck, and gazing back at his stupefied comrades. “The rascals – whoever they are – have stolen the ‘Restless.’ Joe, our splendid boat is gone!”

CHAPTER IV

TAKING A GREAT CHANCE

Joe, with a voiceless gulp, sprang forward once more, pausing at the string-piece only, and peering hard out into the black, wet night.

Hank Butts brought his club down over a snubbing post with such force as to shatter the weapon.

For a few moments Tom Halstead stood looking about him in an uncertain way, as though trying to arouse himself from a hideous nightmare.

“They’ve stolen our boat!” he gasped.

Whoever had done this deed might almost as well have taken the young captain’s life. The “Restless” was a big part of that life.

“Oh, well,” muttered Hank, thickly, “whoever took the yacht must leave it somewhere. You can’t hide a craft of that size. We’ll hear from the ‘Restless’ all right, in a day or two – or in a week, anyway.”

“Whoever took the yacht away from here may know next to nothing about handling a boat,” choked Tom, hoarsely. “We may find the dear old craft again – yes – but perhaps wedged on the rocks somewhere, – a hopeless wreck. O-o-oh! It makes me feel ugly and heartsick, all in one!”

“The ‘Restless’ can’t have broken loose during the storm, can it?” asked Hank Butts.

“No,” retorted Tom and Joe in the same breath, and with the utmost positiveness.

“Well, what are we going to do?” asked Hank.

The answer to the question was hard to find. Lonely Island lay five miles off the shore. Wireless communication was out of the question. They were out of the track of passing vessels, nor was any stray, friendly craft at all likely to show up on this dark, forbidding night.

“Come on back, fellows,” said Tom, chokingly. “There’s nothing we can do here, and Mr. Seaton must know the whole situation.”

The owner of the bungalow listened to them with a blank face when the Motor Boat Club boys again stood before him.

“I can’t even guess what to make out of this,” he confessed.

“It would help Dalton greatly if Mr. Clodis died to-night, wouldn’t it, sir?” inquired the young skipper.

“It would help Dalton much, and be of still greater value to the wretches behind Dalton,” replied Mr. Seaton, grinding his teeth.

“Then, sir, as the tug went back to mainland with two of the doctors, isn’t it possible that some spy may have concluded that *all* the doctors had returned until summoned again?”

“That seems very likely,” nodded the owner of the bungalow.

“Then perhaps Dalton – and those behind him – hope that Mr. Clodis will become much worse, and die before you can again summon help from the mainland.”

“That looks more likely than any other explanation of these strange happenings,” agreed Mr. Seaton, studying the floor, while the frown on his face deepened.

“And the scoundrels,” quavered Tom, “may even come back during the night and try to make *sure* that Mr. Clodis dies without ever becoming conscious.”

“I don’t quite see why they need care so much,” replied Mr. Seaton, slowly. “Dalton got all of Clodis’s papers – the ones that I wanted preserved from the wretches back of Dalton.”

“Are you sure they have *all*?” propounded Captain Halstead.

“Why, Clodis carried the papers in a money-belt, and, in undressing him, we found that belt gone.”

“Have you looked through the baggage that we brought ashore with Mr. Clodis?”

“I haven’t thought of it. Haven’t had time,” replied Mr. Seaton. “But I will now. Mr. Clodis’s steamer trunk is in the room with him. We’ll bring it out, and search.”

Tom and Hank brought the trunk out.

“The lock hasn’t been tampered with, you see, sir,” suggested Halstead.

“Here are Clodis’s keys,” replied Powell Seaton, producing a ring. One of the keys he fitted to the trunk lock, next throwing up the lid. After rummaging for a few moments, Mr. Seaton brought up a sealed envelope from the bottom of the trunk.

“Dalton *would* have been glad to get this,” he cried, with a near approach to delight.

“Lock it up tight in your innermost pockets then, sir,” counseled Tom Halstead. “The contents of that envelope must be what Dalton has come back here for, or sent someone else for. And, until he gets it, he must plan to keep Lonely Island out of touch with the whole world. We’ll hear from him again to-night, I’m thinking.”

“Will we?” flared Mr. Seaton, stepping briskly across the room. Unlocking a cupboard door, he brought out a repeating shot-gun. From an ammunition box he helped himself to several shells, fitting six of them into the magazine of the gun.

“Buckshot talks, sometimes,” said the owner of the bungalow, more quietly. “I shall be awake to-night, and have this gun always with me.”

“Have you any other weapons, sir?” asked Tom.

“Yes; a revolver – here it is.”

Powell Seaton held out the weapon, but Halstead shook his head.

“Dr. Cosgrove is the one who’ll want that, since he must stay by Mr. Clodis to-night. And, see here, Mr. Seaton, impress upon the doctor that he mustn’t take a nap, even for a moment. As for you, you’ll want to be watching the house in general.”

“Why, where will you young men be?” inquired Mr. Seaton.

“We couldn’t stay indoors, with our boat gone, sir,” Tom answered. “The first thing we must do is to explore all around the island. Even if we don’t get a sign of the ‘Restless,’ we may find out something else. We may be able to catch someone trying to land on this island later to-night.”

“Yes; it will be best to have guards outside roaming about the island,” admitted Powell Seaton, readily. Then, lowering his voice as he signed to the Motor Boat Club boys to draw closer to him, Mr. Seaton added:

“Something, of some nature, *will* be attempted to-night. There is no other sound explanation of the crippling of the wireless and the stealing of the boat. So be vigilant, boys – as I shall also be while you’re gone.”

Hank helped himself to a fresh club – a stouter one than that which he had broken over the snubbing post at the dock. Then out into the black night fared the three Motor Boat Club boys.

“Shall we keep together, or spread?” asked Joe Dawson.

“Together,” nodded Tom Halstead. “If there are prowlers about, we can’t tell how soon three of us may be even too few. Remember, we have only firewood to fight with, and we don’t know what kind of men we may run up against.”

So Tom led his friends down to a point but little south of the dock. From here, following the shore, they started to prowl slowly around Lonely Island, all the while keeping a sharp watch to seaward.

“If the boat is in any waters near at hand we ought to get some sign of her whereabouts by keeping a sharp enough watch,” Tom advised his comrades. “They can’t sail or handle the boat without the occasional use of a light in the motor room. The gleam of a lantern across the water may be enough to give us an idea where she is.”

Peering off into the blackness of the night, this seemed like rather a forlorn hope.

"If whoever has stolen the boat intends to land later to-night," hinted Joe, "it's much more likely that the thieves are, at this moment, a good, biggish distance away, so as not to give us any clew to their intentions."

In the course of twenty minutes the Motor Boat Club boys had made their way around to the southern end of the island.

Somewhat more than a mile to the southward lay a small, unnamed island. It was uninhabited, and too sandy to be of value to planters. Yet it had one good cove of rather deep water.

Tom halted, staring long and hard in the direction where he knew this little spot on the ocean to stand. It was too black a night for any glimpse of the island to be had against the sky.

"That would be a good enough place for our pirates to have taken the 'Restless,'" he muttered, to his comrades.

"If we only had a boat, we could know, bye-and-bye," muttered Hank, discontentedly.

"We have been known to swim further than that," said Joe, quietly.

"But never in such a sea as is running to-night," sighed Tom Halstead. "Even as the water is, I'd like to chance it, but I'm afraid it would be useless. And it would leave Mr. Seaton and the doctor alone against any surprise."

"I'd swim that far, or drown, even in this sea," muttered Dawson, vengefully, "if I had any idea that our boat lay over that way."

For two or three minutes the boys stood there, talking. Not once did Tom Halstead turn his eyes away from the direction of the island to the southward.

"Look there!" the young skipper finally uttered, clutching at Joe's elbow. "Did you see that?"

"Yes," voiced Joe, in instant excitement.

"That" was a tiny glow of light, made small by the distance.

"It's a lantern, being carried by someone," continued Captain Tom, after a breathless pause. "There – it vanishes! Oh, I say – gracious!"

Joe, too, gave a gasp.

As for Hank Butts, that youth commenced to breathe so hard that there was almost a rattle to his respiration.

Immediately following the disappearance of the distant light, four smaller, dimmer lights appeared, in a row.

"That's the same light, showing through the four starboard ports of the motor room," trembled Joe Dawson. "Starboard, because the lantern was carried forward, before it disappeared briefly in the hatchway of the motor room."

"That's our boat – there isn't a single doubt of it," cried Tom Halstead, enthusiastically. "And now – oh, fellows! We've simply got to swim over there, rough sea or smooth sea. We've got to get our own boat back unless the heavens fall on us on the way over!"

"Humph! What are we going to do," demanded Hank Butts, "if we find a gang aboard that we can't whip or bluff?"

"That," spoke Captain Tom, softly, "will have to be decided after we get there. But swim over there we must, since there isn't anything on this island that even looks like a boat. See here, Joe, you and Hank trot up to the bungalow and tell Mr. Seaton what we've seen. The 'Restless' is at anchor in the cove yonder. There are plenty of logs up at the bungalow. Come back with one big enough to buoy us up in the water, yet not so big but what we can steer it while swimming. And bring with it a few lengths of that quarter-inch cord from the dynamo room. Don't be too long, will you, fellows?"

After Joe and Hank had departed, Tom Halstead watched the light shining behind the four distant ports until it disappeared. Then he looked at the waves long and wonderingly.

"It's a big chance to take. I don't know whether we can ever get out there in a sea like this," he muttered. "Yet, what wouldn't I do to get control of our own boat again? Our own boat – the

good old 'Restless'! Joe isn't saying much of anything; he never does, but I know how he feels over the stealing of the boat and the chance that bunglers may leave her on the rocks somewhere along this coast!"

A few minutes passed. Then the young skipper heard hurrying footsteps. Joe and Hank hove into sight out of the deep gloom, bearing an eight-foot log on their shoulders.

"Good enough," nodded Halstead, eyeing the log approvingly. "Now, wade into the water with it, and let's see whether it will buoy us all up at need."

All three waded out with the log, until they were in nearly up to their shoulders.

"Now, hang to it, and see if it will hold us up," commanded Captain Tom Halstead.

The log bore them up, but the crest of a big wave, rolling in, hurled them back upon the beach. Tom dragged the log up onto dry ground.

"Now, first of all, let's lash our clubs to the log," suggested the young skipper. This was soon accomplished. Then each of the Motor Boat Club boys made a medium length of the cord fast around his chest, under the arm-pits.

"The next trick," proposed Halstead, "is to make the other end fast to the log, allowing just length enough so that you can swim well clear of the log itself, and yet be able to haul yourselves back to the log in case you find your strength giving out."

This took some calculation, but at last the three motor boat boys decided that eight feet of line was the proper length. This decided, and accomplished, they carried the log down into the water, and pushed resolutely off into the blackness.

Even Tom Halstead, who allowed himself few doubts, little believed that they could accomplish this long, dangerous swimming cruise over a rough sea.

CHAPTER V

TOM MATCHES ONE TRICK WITH ANOTHER

At the outset Joe swam at the rear, frequently giving a light push to send the log riding ahead. Tom and Hank swam on either side, half-towing the timber that was to be their buoy when needed.

All three, reared at the edge of salt water, as they had been, were strong, splendid swimmers. This night, however, with the rough waves, the feat was especially dangerous.

“Swim the way a fellow does when he knows he’s really *got to*,” was the young skipper’s terse advice as they started.

It became a contest of endurance. Tom and Joe, the two Maine boys, were doggedly determined to reach their boat or perish in the attempt. Hank Butts, the Long Island boy, though perhaps possessing less fine courage than either of his comrades, had a rough way of treating danger as a joke. This may have been a pretense, yet in times of peril it passed well enough for grit.

Any one of the three could have swum a mile readily on a lightly rolling sea, but to-night the feat was a vastly sterner one. Hank was the first to give out, after going a little more than an eighth of the distance. He swam to the log, throwing his right arm over it and holding on while the two Maine boys pushed and towed it. Finally, when young Butts had broken away to swim, Joe closed in, holding to the log for a while. At last it came even doughty Tom Halstead’s turn to seek this aid to buoyancy.

Nor had they covered half the distance, in all, when all three found themselves obliged to hold to the log, as it rolled and plunged, riding the waves. Worst of all, despite their exertions, all three now found their teeth chattering.

“Say, it begins to look like a crazy undertaking,” declared Hank, with blunt candor. “Can we possibly make it?”

“We’ve got to,” retorted Tom Halstead, his will power unshaken.

“I don’t see the light over there any more,” observed Hank, speaking the words in jerks of one syllable, so intense was the shaking of his jaws.

“Maybe the boat isn’t over yonder any longer,” admitted Captain Tom, “but we’ve got to chance it. And say, we’d better shove off and try to swim again, to warm ourselves up. We’re in danger of shaking ourselves plum to pieces.”

There was another great peril, on which none of them had calculated well enough before starting. When they were clear of the log, swimming, it pitched so on the tops of the waves that it was likely, at any instant, to drive against the head of one of the swimmers and crack his skull.

“If we had known all this before we started—” began Hank, the next time the three swimmers were driven to cling, briefly, to their movable buoy.

“We’d have started just the same,” retorted Tom, as stiffly as his chattering teeth would let him speak.

“Humph!” muttered Hank, unbelievably. “It’s a fool’s dream, this kind of a swim.”

“It’s less work to go ahead than to turn back, now,” broke in Joe, his teeth accompanying his words with the clatter of castanets.

“No; the wind and tide would be with us going back,” objected Butts. “We could almost drift back.”

“And die of chills on the way,” contended Tom, doggedly. “No, sir! We’ve got to go ahead. I’m swimming to the tune of thoughts of the galley fire aboard the ‘Restless’!”

“Br-r-r!” shook Hank, as the three cast loose from the log once more and struck out, panting, yet too cold to stay idle any longer.

It was tantalizing enough. The longer they swam, the more the boys began to believe that the island they sought was retreating from before them. Hank was almost certain they were moving in a circle, but Halstead, with a keen sense of location, insisted that they were going straight, even if very slowly, to the nameless island.

“I see it,” breathed the young skipper, exultantly, at last.

“What – the island?” bellowed Hank Butts.

“No; but I’d swear I saw the ‘Restless’ the last time we rode a high wave,” Halstead shouted back.

Ten minutes afterwards all three of the Motor Boat Club boys caught occasional glimpses of something dark and vague that they believed to be the hull of their yacht. The belief gave them renewed courage. Even Hank no longer had any desire to turn back. His whole thought centered on the lively times that were likely to begin when they tried to regain control of their boat from whomever had stolen it.

Then, bit by bit the trio worked their log buoy into the cove. Once they were inside, the water was very much smoother. Resting a few moments for breath, they then made a last dash forward, to get alongside.

In this smoother, more shallow water, the “Restless” rode securely at anchor. As they swam closer, the boys found that they could discover no human presence on the decks. Had the boat-stealers gone ashore on the nameless island? If so, it would be a comparatively easy matter to get aboard and cut out of the cove with their own craft.

Close up alongside they went. Tom Halstead was the first to be able to reach up at the hull and draw himself up over the side. Then, with his pocket-knife, as he lay at the rail of the “Restless,” the young skipper slashed the cord that still held him bound to the log. Reaching over, he passed the knife to Hank. In utter silence the Long Island boy cut the clubs free, and passed them up. Next Hank drew himself aboard, after passing the jackknife to Joe Dawson.

Just a little later all three of the Motor Boat Club boys found themselves standing on the deck, each grasping his own firewood weapon. They made no noise, for they knew not who, or how many others might be on board below. If they had a desperate gang of thieves to contend with, then their troubles had not yet even begun!

Joe and Hank stood where they were, shaking as though in the last ditch of ague, while Halstead went forward, with the soft tread of a cat, to peer down into the motor room, the hatchway of which stood open.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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