

Hancock Harrie Irving

**The Motor Boat Club at
the Golden Gate: or, A
Thrilling Capture in the Great...**



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Hancock H.

The Motor Boat Club at the Golden Gate: or, A Thrilling Capture in the
Great Fog / H. Hancock — «Public Domain»,

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H. Irving Hancock

The Motor Boat Club at the Golden Gate; or, A Thrilling Capture in the Great Fog

CHAPTER I

TOM HALSTEAD, KNIGHT OF THE OVERLAND MAIL

"I feel it in my bones," announced Joe Dawson, quietly though positively.

"That's no talk for an engineer," jibed Tom Halstead. "Tell me, instead, that you read it in your gauge."

"Oh, laugh, if you want to," nodded Dawson, showing no offense. "But you'll find that I'm right. You know, I don't often make predictions."

"Yet, this time, you feel that something disastrous is going to happen before this train rolls out on the mole at Oakland? In other words, before we set foot in San Francisco?"

"No, I don't say quite that," objected Joe, thoughtfully. "There's a heap of the navigator about you, Tom Halstead, and you're pinning me down to the map and the chronometer. I won't predict quite as closely as that. But, either before we reach 'Frisco, or mighty soon after we get there, something is going to happen."

"And it's going to be a disaster?" questioned Tom, closely.

"For someone, yes; and we're going to be in it, at great risk."

"Well, it's a comfort to have it narrowed down even as closely as that," smiled Tom Halstead. "I hope it isn't going to be another earthquake, though."

"No," agreed Joe, thoughtfully.

"Oh, well, that much of your prediction will comfort the people of San Francisco, anyway."

"Now, you're laughing at me again," grinned Joe, good-naturedly.

"No; I'm not," protested Halstead, but belied himself by the twinkle in his eyes, and by whistling softly the air of a popular song that the boys had heard in a New York theatre just before leaving for the West.

At the present moment both boys were sitting comfortably facing each other in their section in a sleeping car on the luxurious Overland Mail. It was early forenoon. They had left Sacramento behind some time before, on the last stretch of the run across the state of California.

Joe Dawson was riding facing forward. Tom Halstead, in the seat opposite, half lolled at the window-ledge, with his back toward the engine. Both boys had slept well on their last night out from San Francisco. Both had breakfasted heartily, that morning, in the dining car now left behind at the state capital. The next thing that would interest them, so far as they could now guess, would be their arrival at Oakland, and the subsequent ferry trip that would land them in San Francisco.

It may seem a curious fact to the reader, but neither Tom Halstead nor Joe Dawson knew just what new phases of life awaited them in the City by the Golden Gate. They were engaged to enter the employment of a man who owned a motor yacht. The owner had agreed to their own terms in the way of salary, and he was paying all their expenses on this luxurious trip westward. Moreover, the same owner had engaged some of the other members of the Motor Boat Club of the Kennebec, as will soon be told.

Readers of the preceding volumes of this series are already well acquainted with bright, energetic, loyal and capable Tom Halstead, who, from the start, had held the post of fleet captain of the Motor Boat Club. The same readers are equally familiar with the career of Joe Dawson, fleet engineer of the Club.

As narrated in "The Motor Boat Club of the Kennebec," Tom and Joe were two boys of seafaring stock, and natives of Maine, having been born near the mouth of the Kennebec River. That first volume detailed how the two young men served aboard the "Sunbeam," the motor yacht of a Boston broker, and how the boys aided the Government officers in solving the mystery of Smugglers' Island. Out of those adventures arose the founding of the Club, with Tom and Joe at its head.

In "The Motor Boat Club at Nantucket" the two boys were again seen to great advantage. There they had some most lively sea adventures, all centering around the abduction of the Dunstan heir. Next, as told in "The Motor Boat Club off Long Island," the motor boat boys played an exciting part in the balking of a great Wall Street conspiracy. In recognition of their services at this time, the man whom they most helped presented them with a fifty-five foot cruising motor boat, which the two proud young owners named the "Restless." Afterwards they installed a wireless telegraph apparatus on the boat, and then came one of their truly famous cruises, as related in "The Motor Boat Club and the Wireless," wherein wireless telegraphy was employed in ferreting out one of the great mysteries of the sea.

"The Motor Boat Club in Florida" described the sea wanderings of Captain Tom and Engineer Joe in the Gulf waters, and their subsequent adventures in the Everglades and at Tampa, including the laying of the Ghost of Alligator Swamp.

From time to time other seafaring boys, whose experience aboard motor yachts qualified them, were elected members of the Motor Boat Club, an organization which now boasted some forty members along the Atlantic seaboard. Several of these boys had made themselves barely less famous than had Halstead and Dawson.

Broker George Prescott, of Boston, their first employer and founder of the Club, was still their staunch friend. So, too, in scarcely less degree, was Francis Delavan, a Wall Street financier to whom Tom and Joe had rendered most valuable services.

It was through Mr. Delavan that Halstead and Dawson had secured their present engagement, the details of which they did not yet know. This engagement had come just as the young men were leaving Florida waters in January, preparatory to making their way to New York, near which great city the "Restless" was now laid up, out of commission at present, though as seaworthy a boat as ever.

Tom had been allowed to engage Jeff Randolph, the Florida member of the Club, for this new, unknown enterprise. Jeff was believed to be either on his way, or already in San Francisco, at the Palace Hotel, on Market Street, which was to be the meeting place of the motor boat boys.

Yet there were other old friends due to meet the fleet captain and fleet engineer. Mr. Delavan had also engaged, by wire, Dick Davis and Ab Perkins, of Maine, now back from a famous trip to Brazil as told in "The Motor Boat Club and the Wireless." Jed Prentiss, a Nantucket member of the Club, was also on his way to or in San Francisco to join them, thanks to Mr. Prescott's interest. How Jed joined the Club, and proved himself more than worthy, was all told in "The Motor Boat Club at Nantucket."

The name of the San Francisco man who had engaged six members of the Motor Boat Club to cross the continent was Joseph Baldwin. Beyond this the boys knew nothing of him, save that Francis Delavan had vouched for him. That was enough. Not even the name of Baldwin's craft was known to the seafaring boys who were crossing the continent.

"I wonder if Mr. Baldwin will be at Oakland, to meet us?" asked Joe, as the train sped evenly, swiftly along.

"It isn't likely," replied Tom. "He has told us where to report. I fancy he considers that enough."

"A man might get a boat's crew together a good deal more cheaply," mused Joe, aloud. "Our fellows that Mr. Baldwin has engaged are all top-notchers in the way of salary. With such a crew it's going to cost our man a good deal to keep his boat running."

"You know the reputation that California millionaires have, Joe," laughed his chum. "It is said of them that they'd sooner spend money than keep it drawing interest."

"Still," pondered Joe Dawson, "I don't believe California people like to pitch money out of the window any better than people of other sections do."

"It has struck me," Tom went on, "that we're engaged by a man who is running a racing boat. If that is so, and we can get the top speed out of his craft, then I suppose Mr. Baldwin wouldn't consider the matter of expense at all. All he wants, in that case, is to win cups and build a big reputation for his boat."

"I hope it *is* a racer," cried Joe, his eyes glistening. "Whew! How our crowd, pulling together in team work, could make a boat everlastingly sprint over the waves!"

The car in which the two boys sat was the last of the train. It had an observation platform at the rear. In this observation compartment the motor boat boys had spent much time while the train was rolling along through the highly picturesque scenery of the Rocky Mountains. This morning, however, going swiftly past sun-lit sections of California, over a nearly level road, both young travelers were content to remain in their seats by the window.

In the car were a dozen other passengers. Only one other besides the motor boat boys was especially young. She was a girl of about eighteen, blond, rather plump and very pretty. She appeared to be traveling alone, having boarded the train at Kansas City. Tom and Joe had been able to offer her a few travelers' courtesies, which had been graciously accepted. Neither young man, however, knew the girl's name. Both motor boat boys were too well bred to attempt to force an acquaintance.

Just now, as Tom happened to lean over his seat and glance down the aisle, he saw that this young lady was in the observation compartment. She appeared to be alone there. Something in the expression on her face made her seem highly uneasy about something.

"I hope she isn't in any trouble," murmured Halstead, to himself, "and that she isn't going to find anything unpleasant at the end of her journey."

The next time he glanced down the aisle Halstead again caught a glimpse of her face.

"By Jove, I believe she's been crying, or else is about to begin," muttered the young captain. "I wonder if it's real trouble, or just something that she's afraid of."

Then Tom made haste to look away, lest the young lady should see that he had been studying her and take offense.

"Look at the roses," commented Joe, glancing out of the window at a pretty little California village through which the train was passing at somewhat lessened speed. "Great Scott, there are violets growing in the garden we've just passed. February! Think of the deep feet of snow on either bank of the Kennebec just now!"

"It's the land of roses and other posies, all right," agreed Halstead, himself looking out with a good deal of interest at the bright scene under the soft haze of the California winter day.

"Say, these are real days! This beats Florida!" exclaimed Joe, enthusiastically.

"When it doesn't rain," remarked the practical Halstead. "You know, this is the rainy season in California."

"I don't care," contended Joe. "Even on a rainy day it must be beautiful in this fine old state."

"And on a foggy one, also," laughed Tom. "You know, at this time of the year, there are likely to be some great old fogs around San Francisco Bay. I've heard that it takes a clever pilot to guess correctly whether he's landing at San Francisco or Oakland."

"Humph!" grunted Joe.

Dawson turned, looking out of the window for some time without speaking.

"We're getting near some big town," he remarked, at last. Then, after glancing at his watch: "It must be Oakland."

"Yes," nodded Tom. "I guess we'll soon be making our stop at the Sixteenth Street station."

"Anything special about that station?"

"It's the last stop before we run out onto the mole at Oakland."

The train had now begun to run, at greatly lessened speed, through one of the streets of the city. Joe found less to interest him. He glanced upward at the rack, toward his traveling bag and overcoat.

"That overcoat seems like an insult to the climate," he remarked.

"Don't throw it away," advised Tom Halstead, "until you see whether some of the 'Frisco nights are chilly. I've sort of an idea they will be."

"I wonder whether we're going to have much time ashore, or whether it will be all spent on the water?" suggested Joe. But Tom, of course, didn't know the answer.

"Sixteenth Street next stop!" called the porter through the car.

"Might as well stretch our legs," hinted Tom, rising. Joe also left his seat.

As several of the passengers in the car were heading toward the front end, the motor boat boys started for the observation compartment at the rear end.

The young lady was still standing there. It looked as though she intended to step down outside as soon as the train should come to a stop. Not wishing to intrude, Tom Halstead halted, a few feet away, Joe doing the same.

Hardly had the train stopped when a porter opened the door of the observation compartment. The young lady quickly descended, the boys following. The young lady remained close to the steps, glancing about her. Lifting their hats, Tom and Joe stepped past her, mingling in the throng at the station. There wasn't much here to see, but it was a relief to be quit of the train for a minute or two.

"There's the engine bell ringing," nudged Joe, at last. "We may as well hustle back."

As the two motor boat boys turned once more, Tom saw the young woman standing beside the rear steps, one hand holding to the brass rail. She appeared rather frightened. Before her, talking rapidly, was a man of perhaps thirty years of age and some five feet nine inches in height. On his smooth-shaven, dark face rested an ugly, black look. Something that the man said just as Tom glanced that way caused the girl to wince and grow paler.

"Why, that fellow has been on the train, though not in our car, for the last two days," occurred to Halstead, swiftly. "And now I remember I saw the young lady talking to him back at Battle Mountain. Jove! but she seems afraid of him. There, she's trying to leave him, and he has caught at her sleeve to hold her. Confound the ugly look in his eyes! I wish she were *my* sister for five minutes!"

Almost unconsciously, in his indignation, Captain Tom increased his pace. Joe, looking in another direction, did not at once perceive this, and so fell a bit behind.

"I'm not going to listen to you any longer," cried the young woman, in a voice that sounded tearful, though she was resolutely keeping the tears back out of her eyes. "You are talking like a coward!"

"Pardon me," said Captain Tom, rather stiffly, brushing past the young man. The girl edged to give the motor boat boy room on the steps, and, as he passed her, started to follow him up into the car.

"You're not going to leave me in that fashion," snapped the dark young man, angrily. "See here —"

Again he caught at the girl's sleeve, after leaping up onto the lowest step.

"Let me go," commanded the girl, indignantly.

"Not until —"

She wrenched herself free, then bounded after Halstead.

"Don't let him come into the car," begged the girl.

"Out of my way, young fellow," ordered the dark man, gaining the second step up.

"Is this man annoying you?" asked Tom, in a friendly tone of the girl, though he turned a cool, hostile stare upon the young man.

"Yes, he is," the young woman answered.

"Get out of the way, boy," commanded the man, reaching out a hand.

Tom Halstead's right hand closed instantly. His fist shot out, landing on the fellow's neck. That persecutor fell back, missed his footing, and went sprawling to the station platform. The girl had started to dart into the car, but now she turned, watching with fearful eyes.

"Oh, don't let him hurt you!" she cried to Tom.

"Thank you," responded the young captain, dryly; "I don't believe he will."

The train was beginning to move as the man fell sprawling on the platform. Joe, who had seen the blow struck, darted in, dragging the fellow swiftly to his feet.

"You'll have to hustle, mister, if you're going to get your car forward," Joe advised him.

"This car is the one I – " began the man.

But Joe coolly swung in ahead of him, elbowing the fellow out of the way. The next moment the porter, grinning, reached over with the key and locked the door of the car, which Dawson had closed.

Looking the picture of rage, the man darted swiftly down the platform. The train was now moving too rapidly, however, for the stranger to get aboard, and the last car rolled by him as he stood, baffled, on the platform.

"I – I don't know how to thank you both," faltered the girl.

"I assure you it didn't even put us to any inconvenience," smiled Captain Tom.

"But – oh! I hope you won't meet him in San Francisco," cried the girl, in sudden alarm. "He's dangerous, ugly, vengeful!"

"We've met such men before," laughed Captain Tom, quietly. "And yet – well, we're here."

"But you don't know that man!" shuddered the girl.

"That we don't is something to brag about, I reckon," smiled Joe.

"If you ever do come face to face with him, or catch him, anywhere, watching you, beware of him!" begged the young lady, earnestly. "He never forgives anything – that wretch!"

"Are you uneasy over the remainder of your journey?" asked Tom, politely. "Will you feel safer for escort?"

"Oh, I shall be all right, now," replied the girl, with a grateful smile, though her cheeks were still pallid. "He is no longer on the train."

"Command us, if you will," begged Captain Tom Halstead, gallantly. He and Joe Dawson lifted their hats courteously, then passed on to their own section.

"One of the little dramas of life that are being enacted all around us," muttered Halstead.

"I wouldn't have minded seeing that one through," returned Joe.

Neither boy, at that moment, suspected that they would yet "see it through."

CHAPTER II

HAZING, M. B. C. K. STYLE

At the ferry slip on the San Francisco side the two motor boat boys saw the young woman again. A big, broad-shouldered, well-dressed, wholesome looking young man of twenty-two or twenty-three years of age, came forward eagerly, hat in hand, to meet her.

"She's all right, now," declared Joe, with satisfaction. "Gracious! That husky young fellow could eat up two or three muckers like the one you punched, Tom."

"Yes; our young lady of the journey is surely all right," nodded Halstead, delighted with what he had seen. "So come along, Joe. We'll probably never see any of that party again."

Through a throng of eager cabmen the two young motor boat boys plodded sturdily. Neither had ever been in San Francisco before, but they knew that the ferry came in at the foot of Market Street, and that the Palace Hotel was but a few blocks from the water-front on the same great artery of traffic.

"Might as well walk up, and get a little bit of a look at the town," proposed Halstead.

"Which side of the street is the Palace on?" queried Joe.

"East."

"Then we'll cross over. I don't believe we can miss it."

It was a bustling crowd through which the boys steered their way. The man on the San Francisco sidewalk who is under eighty years of age is engaged in making his fortune, and has no time to lose. After he has made it, he buys an automobile, and has comparatively little need of a sidewalk.

Men from every country in Europe and the Orient passed them. There was, of course, a large sprinkling of native Americans, yet even the chance passer knew that he was moving through a throng recruited from the four quarters of the world.

To Tom the walk ended all too soon. However, they were bent on business, not pleasure, so they turned in briskly through the main entrance of the Palace Hotel as soon as a policeman had pointed it out to them.

Captain Tom Halstead stepped to the desk, picking up a pen to register. "Are Davis, Perkins, Prentiss and Randolph here ahead of us?" queried Halstead, as soon as he had written his name and his chum's.

"All of 'em," smiled the clerk, after glancing at the entry on the hotel register. "Davis, who got here first, with Perkins, engaged rooms close together for the whole party. Front! I'll have you shown right up, Captain Halstead."

The colored boy in blue uniform and brass buttons confiscated the bags and overcoats of the two young travelers, leading the way to the elevator. That bell-boy turned his head to conceal a grin that illumined his face.

"So our friends are all here ahead of us, and have everything ready?" remarked young Dawson. The bell-boy, his head still turned away, seemed to be choking.

"I wonder if they've seen Mr. Baldwin, or heard from him?" mused Tom, aloud.

"Right dis way, sah," begged the bell-boy, stepping out of the elevator ahead of them at the third floor.

He led them down a long corridor, turned into another corridor, then halted before a door. That bell-boy gave three distinct knocks; a pause, then two more knocks.

"I reckon yo' can go right in, sah," announced the bell-boy, dropping some of his burden in order to throw the door open.

Utterly unsuspecting, Tom and Joe passed through the doorway. The instant they had done so, the bell-boy tossed their bags and coats in after them, yanked the door shut and fled, chuckling.

"Here they come! Welcome!" roared Dick Davis's deep, hearty voice.

A short hallway led from the door to the room proper. As Tom Halstead passed over the inner threshold a pair of arms reached out from either side, yanking him into the room out of Joe's sight. Dawson leaped after his chum, only to be similarly seized.

Then it snowed! At least, for a brief instant, that was what the victims thought.

Tom was neatly, ruthlessly tripped, being sent sprawling to the floor, while Ab Perkins, snatching up a bolster, which he had ripped open, shook all the fine, downy feathers over him. They sifted down the young captain's neck; they obscured his vision; some of the small feathers fell into his mouth. He fell to spitting them out with vigor, even before he tried to get up.

Nor did Joe Dawson fare any better. If anything, he was rather more roughly handled by Jed Prentiss and Jeff Randolph.

"Now, roll 'em!" roared Dick Davis.

Before either of the newcomers could rise to his feet they were rolled together in the middle of the floor. Ab lifted the mattress from the bed, plumping it down over the two victims. Then all four of the gleeful assailants threw themselves across the mattress, shoving it over the floor, using Tom and Joe, underneath, for rollers.

And, over it all, rose the famous club yell:

"M. B. C. K.! M. B. C. K.! Motor Boat Club! Wow!"

"Oh, but we're glad to see 'em!" yelled Dick Davis, in his deepest tones. "Good old chums! Keep up the welcome, fellows!"

From under the mattress Tom Halstead managed to make himself heard, though his voice sounded muffled indeed.

"Help!" he roared. "Turn out the port watch! Mutiny!"

"Port watch, ahoy! Roll up on deck, you lubbers!" roared Ab Perkins. "Cap'n wants you!"

At that Jed and Jeff left the mattress, darting to where Tom's and Joe's traveling bags lay. These they quickly opened, dumping all the contents on the floor.

"All hands to quell mutiny!" yelled Jed Prentiss. Dick Davis and Ab Perkins joined them on the jump.

That gave Tom and Joe, both very red-faced and much winded, a chance to crawl out from under the mattress.

Yet no sooner did they show their astonished faces than all four of the first-comers began to pelt them with the articles dumped from the traveling bags.

Slippers flew straight and true, landing with swats. Hair brushes, tooth-brushes, cakes of soap, boxes of tooth-powder and numerous other articles filled the air, a veritable cyclone with the fleet captain and the fleet engineer in the middle of it.

"Cut it!" commanded Tom Halstead, sternly. "Oh, if I had my revolver and handcuffs and leg-irons here. This is the last time I'll ever go on deck without 'em. But cut it – anyway!"

Dick Davis, having thrown the last missile that came to hand, and having pitched Halstead's overcoat up in the air so that it now lay hanging from the chandelier, suddenly straightened up, looking very grave as he saluted and roared out:

"Aye, aye, sir!"

At that the other three disturbers of the peace lined up with Dick, all saluting.

"What's the meaning of all this riot?" insisted Halstead, trying to keep back the grin that struggled to his face.

"After not having seen each other for all these moons," demanded Davis, in a hurt voice, "can't we do anything to show you how ding-whanged glad we are to behold you two once more?"

"Your joy takes a strange turn," grimaced Captain Tom.

"I prefer people who put their welcome in writing," retorted Joe.

At that Ab Perkins, with a whoop, made for a table. From it he snatched up a cork, one end of which had been burned to a char.

"Come on, then, fellows," proposed Ab Perkins, gleefully; "we'll write our welcome on Joe's face."

"Will you, though?" demanded Dawson, crouching low, as though for a football tackle. He caught Ab, and rising with that boisterous youth, toppled him over. Ab Perkins went sprawling; fortunately for him he landed across the mattress.

"Hold on!" expostulated Tom Halstead. "The reception committee is excused – fired – bounced, in fact. Now, stop all this monkey-business, and let's get down to trade topics. But, first of all – "

Tom paused to spit out two or three fragments of down feathers. Then he crossed to where the water pitcher stood on a tray. Pouring out a glass of water, Halstead took a mouthful, while the late mutineers looked on expectantly.

"O-oh! Ugh! Waugh! Wow!" sputtered Tom, expelling his mouthful into a waste-water jar beside the wash-stand. "That water's *salt!*"

"Well, what of it, you bo'sun's mate of a lobster trap?" demanded Ab Perkins, aggressively. "Is it the first time you've ever hit up against salt water?"

"Now, see here, fellows," grinned Halstead, looking around at the impish faces of the first-comers, "this is all right. We know how glad you are to see us. Your pleasure is far greater than we had ever dared to hope – "

"Oh, we can show more pleasure!" proposed Dick.

"Do it at your personal risk, then!" defied the young captain, arming himself with the water pitcher. "Now, then, will you all be quiet?"

"Oh, aye!" promised young Davis, with a sudden assumption of meekness.

"I trust you – trust you all to the death," affirmed Tom, grimly. "But I'm going to keep hold of the water pitcher just the same!"

"This deck doesn't look ship-shape, does it?" demanded Dick Davis, glancing about him. "Hadn't we better change craft? Wait here a moment."

Stepping to the push-button, he pressed twice, for the porter. Tom Halstead remained on guard, armed as before, and Joe keeping rather close to him, until the porter knocked at the door.

"See here, my friend," remarked Dick, holding out a dollar bill to the porter, "there has been a ship-wreck here."

"It looks like it, sir," grinned the porter, pocketing the money. "What'll you have, sir?"

"Find the chambermaid that belongs on this floor," begged Dick, "and bring her here."

The porter was soon back with the chambermaid, who also received a dollar bill from young Davis.

"Now, you two try some team-work, please," begged Dick Davis, "and see whether you can make this place look neat enough to be a captain's cabin. Gentlemen of the Motor Boat Club, will you adjourn to the costly quarters that Ab and myself consider almost good enough for us?"

Tom Halstead laid down the water pitcher and passed out of the room last of all.

"I reckon you'd better go into the other room first, Joe, and let me bring up the rear," called Tom, grimly. "Then we can watch, from both ends of the line, for any new tricks."

Dick Davis produced a key, admitting all hands to the adjoining room.

"Now, be seated," proposed Davis, in his most hospitable tone. The club members found chairs.

"Have you seen Mr. Baldwin?" inquired Captain Tom.

"No; but we've sent him word," Ab replied. "Mr. Baldwin has offices in the Chronicle Building."

"Is that near?" queried Halstead.

"Only a few hawser lengths from here, on the other side of Market Street," put in Jed Prentiss. "Come here to the window. There's the Chronicle Building over yonder."

"Mr. Baldwin has a telephone, of course?" suggested Captain Tom.

"Yes; 9378 Market."

"I can tell him we're here, then," murmured Tom, crossing the room to where a telephone apparatus rested against the wall.

"Don't," prompted Dick. "Mr. Baldwin has sent his orders. You can 'phone him between three and three-thirty to-day. Mustn't bother him at any other time."

"That's right, is it?" demanded Halstead, looking half-suspiciously at Davis.

"Quite right," nodded the latter youth, gravely. Dick was older than the others, being nineteen, as against a general average of sixteen years for the other boys. Dick was different in another respect. While the other five boys followed motor boating as a means of livelihood, depending upon their earnings, young Davis, the son of a ship-builder of Bath, Maine, was at all times well supplied with money. Dick's outline for the future included a possible college course, and then breaking into the ship-building business with his father. It was not yet quite decided whether young Davis should omit the college part of the plan. In the meantime, the elder Davis believed that an active membership in the Motor Boat Club would be the best possible training to fit his son for a position in the ship-yard.

"Well, if those are the instructions, then," replied Captain Tom, returning to his chair, "we'll wait until a few minutes after three."

"And now it's half-past eleven," said Jed, consulting his watch. "Luncheon will not be served until one. We can wait here as well as anywhere. Say, fellows, I'm just crazy to hear some good old yarns of what you others have been through."

With that, yarn-spinning became the order of the day. The young men were still at it when they went down to the gorgeous dining room of the Palace Hotel. The air about their table was thick with yarns all through the meal.

While they sat around the table, absorbed in one another's stories, a dark-visaged, well-dressed man of thirty started to enter the dining room. Just at the threshold, however, he paused, for his glance had alighted on a profile view of Captain Tom Halstead at one of the tables in the center of the dining room.

"That's the cub who struck me this morning," muttered the dark-faced one, drawing back. "I want to know who he is. I want to place him – I want to meet him and settle the account for that blow and the disappointment it brought about!"

Tom Halstead turned around, a moment later, but he did not see the man he had knocked from the train that morning at the Sixteenth Street station in Oakland. That worthy had drawn quickly back out of sight, and was now looking about for some hotel employé to question.

Ten minutes later he of the dark visage had all the information he felt he needed.

"Tom Halstead? So that's your name?" snarled the stranger, as he started for the street entrance. "And you're employed by Baldwin – could anything be more favorable to our meeting again, eh?" The stranger smiled darkly, meaningly, as he pronounced the name of Baldwin.

Luncheon over, the yarning motor boat boys embarked in the elevator. This time they went direct to the room assigned to Tom and Joe. The trunks of these two young men had arrived, and now rested in the room.

Once more the yarning went on, until Captain Tom checked it at exactly two minutes past three o'clock.

CHAPTER III

CAPTAIN TOM'S NEW COMMAND

"It's time for Mr. Baldwin to hear from us, now," announced the young skipper, rising and crossing to the room-telephone. He gave the number, waiting briefly.

"Hello," sounded a voice in the receiver.

"Hello," returned Tom, quietly. "Is this Mr. Baldwin?"

"No; wait a moment. I'll connect you."

"Hello," came, an instant later.

"Hello. Mr. Baldwin?"

"Yes."

"I am Captain Tom Halstead, here at the Palace Hotel, awaiting your orders."

"Is Dabson with you?"

"Dawson, sir," Tom corrected. "Yes; Dawson is with me."

"Then your whole crew is on hand?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good! Well, as the finishers are about through with their repair work on my boat we shall be ready to get you aboard without delay."

"May I ask, sir, how big a boat – "

"Captain, be at my office, all of you in uniform, at four o'clock exactly."

"Very good, sir. Four o'clock."

"Captain Halstead, punctuality is one of my failings," warned Joseph Baldwin's voice.

"It's one of my studies, Mr. Baldwin."

"Then, at four o'clock?"

"Four o'clock, sharp, sir!"

"Good-bye."

Ting-ling-ling! Tom hung up the receiver.

"Well," came an eager chorus. "What are we going to do?"

"We're going to get into our club sailing uniforms," smiled Captain Tom, "and we're to be at Mr. Baldwin's office at four o'clock to the minute."

"What sort of a boat – "

"Cruising or racing – "

"Coasting or sea-voy – "

"You'll all of you have to cut out the questions," laughed Tom Halstead. "I've told you every blessed thing I've just learned over the 'phone. Fellows, I think our Mr. Baldwin is stingy – "

"Stingy?" broke in Ab Perkins, with fine scorn. "And paying every one of us first-class salaries!"

"Stingy of words," finished Captain Tom, calmly. "If our new employer keeps on as he has begun, we won't know anything he means to do until the time comes to do it. Then he'll give his complete orders in from six to eight words. That's the way it looks. Now, for your uniforms. Come along, Joe, and we'll get into ours. Mr. Baldwin, I omitted to tell you, did inform me – "

Captain Tom paused, looking mysterious.

"Told you what?" chorused Dick, Ab and Jed, eagerly.

"That he's extremely partial to people who are punctual to the minute," finished Tom Halstead, making a sign that brought Joe along in his trail.

Sailors are accustomed to quick dressing, as they are to quick work of all sorts. Hence the six motor boat boys, all looking decidedly neat and important in their uniforms and visored caps, were

soon on their way to the elevator shaft. Soon afterwards they stepped from the Palace entrance to the street, making for the other side of Market Street at the first crossing.

More than one swift pedestrian paused long enough to send a look back after these six trim, almost martial-looking young men, who walked in pairs and carried themselves like graduates of the Naval Academy.

It was just five minutes before four o'clock when the sextette halted outside the Chronicle Building.

"A couple of minutes to breathe," announced Halstead, watch in hand. Presently, he marched them into the corridor. Here, after a short wait, they stepped into one of the several elevators, leaving it a few floors from the street.

"Sixty seconds yet to spare," whispered Captain Tom, smilingly, holding up his watch.

Precisely at the dot of four o'clock the six motor boat boys filed in at the door of the Baldwin offices, after Halstead had turned the knob.

In the outer office were several clerks, behind a railing. An office boy sat at a desk close by the gate of the railing.

"Mr. Baldwin expects us at four," stated Tom to the boy. "Will you please tell him that Captain Halstead and party are here?"

The boy disappeared. When he returned a briskly-moving man of fifty was at his heels. It was Joseph Baldwin, one of the rich men of the Pacific Coast, and one of its most daring promoters. He was a man who acted, ordinarily, as though the day were but five minutes long and crowded with business. Mr. Baldwin looked like a prosperous business man, though there was nothing foppish in his attire.

"Captain Halstead?" he demanded, holding out a hand. The act was gracious enough, though hurried. In less than a minute Tom had presented his friends and all had been through the handshake.

Back of Mr. Baldwin stood a clerk, holding his employer's hat.

"I'm off for the day, Johnson," he announced. "Is the transportation at the door?"

"Yes, sir. I just looked out of the window. Your transportation is ready."

"Come along, Captain Halstead and gentlemen," directed Mr. Baldwin.

Though he led them swiftly, another clerk had slipped out ahead of them, and now stood by the elevator shaft. A car was just stopping at the floor. Down the party whizzed. Mr. Baldwin led the boys to a street door, outside of which two automobile touring cars stood.

"Captain, I want you and Dawson in the car with me. Let your friends follow in the other."

Two tonneau doors closed with bangs. Off whizzed the cars. Speed laws did not appear to be made for the concern of a man like Joseph Baldwin. It seemed as though the cars had barely started when they ran out onto a dock not much to the westward of the ferry houses.

A man in plain blue uniform and visored cap, wearing the insignia of a quartermaster, stood at the far end of the dock. He saluted as soon as he espied Joseph Baldwin hastening toward him.

"I see you're on time, Bickson."

"Yes, sir."

By this time Mr. Baldwin was going down a short flight of steps to a landing stage. There lay moored a trim-looking sixteen-foot power tender.

"Fall aboard," briefly directed Mr. Baldwin, and the motor boat boys, rather enjoying this systematized bustle, obeyed.

Bickson, without waiting for orders, cast off, started the motor and sent the boat gliding out into the stream.

"Quite a motor yacht that carries a quartermaster," observed Captain Halstead, with a smile.

"I carry three," rejoined Mr. Baldwin, thrusting a cigar into his mouth and lighting it with a "blazer" match.

In and out among the shipping the tender glided. Then, at last, Captain Tom caught sight of a graceful craft some hundred and twenty feet long. She looked like a miniature liner.

"I wonder if I'll ever command a handsome craft like that?" thought the young motor boat skipper, with a brief pang of envy. "Jove! what a boat!"

The next thing the motor boat boys knew they were running up alongside this hundred-and-twenty-footer. A young man of twenty-five or twenty-six, whose uniform proclaimed him to be a watch officer, stood at the top of a side gangway.

"This can't be the boat – such a beauty!" gasped Tom Halstead, inwardly. Joe Dawson's eyes were full of wonder. Ab Perkins's lower jaw was hanging down in proof of his bewilderment. Dick Davis's face was flushing. Jed was staring. Only Jeff Randolph appeared indifferent.

"How do you do, Mr. Costigan?" hailed Mr. Baldwin, leading the way up the side gangway. "Mr. Costigan, pay your respects to the new captain of the 'Panther.' Captain Halstead, Mr. Costigan, your third officer."

If Mr. Costigan appeared astonished, Tom Halstead did not look less so. That he was really to command this big, handsome craft seemed to Tom like a dream. A moment before, when he had realized that the "Panther" was Mr. Baldwin's craft, the most the Maine boy had expected was that he and his companions would be allowed to stand watch in the engine room and on the bridge. But – captain!

Third Officer Costigan, however, saluted in a most proper manner. Tom held out his hand cordially.

"Presently, Mr. Costigan, I shall ask you to show me about this craft."

"At your orders, sir," replied Costigan, again saluting his commanding officer, then making his way forward.

"Here's the captain's cabin. I have the key," announced Mr. Baldwin, leading the way to a door immediately aft of the pilot house. The owner unlocked the door, then led the way inside. Again Captain Tom wondered if he could be dreaming. Though everything was compact in this stateroom, yet all the conveniences were there, too. There was a double bed, a wardrobe locker, running water, two easy chairs, a desk, and a table just under a well-stocked China and glass cupboard.

"Your stateroom runs right through the deck-house from starboard to port," explained Mr. Baldwin, who now appeared less pressed for time. "Bathroom and chart-room open out of this cabin aft. I think, Captain, you will be comfortable."

"Comfortable!" murmured Tom, then smiled in sheer delight.

The other motor boat boys stood about the doorway, not offering to enter while the owner was there. Mr. Baldwin dropped into one of the arm chairs.

"Now, Captain, I'll tell you what we have aboard," continued the owner. "Costigan is third officer. He's a good fellow, and a capable sailor, but he has his limitations, and – well, I don't believe he'll ever be much more than a third officer. You'd better keep him in that grade – unless you find he's better than some of your comrades. One good thing about Costigan is that he has a pilot's license for San Francisco Bay and the coast hereabouts. He's a good pilot, too. Another good thing about Costigan is that he's loyal, and a man who knows how to keep his tongue resting in the back of his mouth.

"Besides Costigan, there are three quartermasters and seven men in the crew. We have also a cook and helper, a cabin steward and a men's steward. That's the whole outfit. We have no one, at present, in the engine-room department. You have men with you to fill out those positions, haven't you, Captain?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then let me see how you'll go to work to place them," shot out Mr. Baldwin, instantly.

"Mr. Perkins, first officer; Mr. Davis, second officer," replied Halstead, promptly. "Mr. Costigan, of course, third officer."

"And in the engine room?" pressed the owner.

"Mr. Dawson, chief engineer; Mr. Prentiss, first assistant; Mr. Randolph, second assistant engineer."

"All right," nodded Joseph Baldwin. "That makes our complement complete, I think. Now, Captain, publish your selections to the crew and take command. There's the bell at the side of your desk."

Hardly had Tom Halstead, still feeling as though in a trance, pressed the button, when a jauntily uniformed sailor appeared at the doorway, saluting.

"My compliments to Mr. Costigan; ask him to come here," ordered Tom.

From the speed with which he reported, Third Officer Costigan must have been awaiting the summons.

"Pipe the crew forward of the pilot house, Mr. Costigan. All hands. I've something to say to them."

The third officer's whistle rang out shrilly forward. A few moments later Captain Halstead was notified that all hands were on deck.

Tom thereupon went forward, accompanied by the new officers of the "Panther," who were proclaimed to the crew, including even the stewards and cooks.

"And I now invite the officers to my cabin," said Captain Halstead as he wound up his harangue to the men. "The details of the deck and engine room watches will be decided at once."

This was soon done. Following the practice that now obtains on many yachts, the watches were made eight hours long, instead of four. This enabled each member of a watch to get a full sleep between watches. In ordinary weather neither the captain nor first officer stands watch. The captain's, or starboard, watch was to be taken by Dick Davis as second officer. Mr. Costigan, third officer, was to stand the first officer's, or port, watch. Joe Dawson, as chief engineer, was generally responsible for the engineering department, but stood no watch in the engine room, the starboard watch at the motors falling to Jed Prentiss, and the port watch to Jeff Randolph. Bickson, as chief quartermaster, was made responsible for the general policing of the craft, the other two quartermasters taking watch trick at the wheel in the pilot house.

During the making of these arrangements Mr. Baldwin had strolled aft to his own suite of rooms. These, immediately aft of the chart room, consisted of parlor, bed-room and bath. Aft of these quarters lay the deck dining room, from which a staircase led down to the cabin proper. Off the cabin were eight handsome staterooms for the owner's guests.

All this Tom and his comrades saw as Costigan piloted them over this superb yacht.

Forward of the main cabin, below, was the chief engineer's stateroom, which Joe would occupy by himself. In Joe's room, also, was service for the chief engineer's meals.

Then there was a stateroom for the second and third officers, and another for the engineer's two assistants. For these junior officers, and Mr. Costigan, there was an officers' mess. Further forward was the crew's mess, then the kitchen department. Ahead of this was the engine room, with the crew's forecabin quarters right up in the bow of the craft, below decks.

"You see, sir," explained Mr. Costigan, "there's everything that could be thought of for the comfort of officers and crew."

"It's the most compact boat I could imagine," declared Captain Tom, enthusiastically.

"You may well say that, sir."

They passed on to inspect the engine room. Joe's eyes fairly gleamed as he inspected the twin motors, the dynamos and all the other details of his own department. It was a finer engine room than Joe Dawson had hoped to command for many years to come. He remained below, with his assistants, to inspect their new domain, while Tom, Ab and Dick returned to the deck with Mr. Costigan.

The "Panther" was schooner rigged, with a full set of sails for each of the two masts. There was a short bowsprit, carrying two jibs.

"This craft does pretty well under sail, sir," declared the third officer.

"She looks as though she ought to," replied Captain Tom. "But what gait does she make with her power alone?"

"She's been running, cruising, sir, at about twelve to fourteen miles an hour. She's listed as a twenty-two mile boat at her best, but I believe, sir, that a good engineer could get twenty-four out of her."

"The new chief engineer is one who can get out any speed that the motors will stand."

"He looks it, sir."

Halstead was careful always to use the word "Mister." Watch officers and engineers, who are also officers, are always addressed in that way, by the captain, or even by the owner. Costigan was equally careful to say "sir," when addressing any officer of grade above his own.

"When you can spare the time, Captain, I'll have a few words with you," called Mr. Baldwin, showing his head through the starboard doorway of his suite.

"At once, sir," replied Captain Tom, turning and going to the owner's door. At the threshold the new captain of the "Panther" halted.

"Come right in, Captain. Take a chair," invited the owner. "Now, then, what do you think of your new task?"

"I'm astounded, sir. Overjoyed, too," Tom replied, with a candid smile.

"Why?"

"Well, sir, this craft represents the height of my dreams. The 'Panther' is twice the length and about four times the total size of any boat I've ever commanded before."

"Are you afraid it's too big an undertaking for you?" asked Mr. Baldwin, regarding his young sailing master keenly.

"No, sir!" came the prompt answer.

"Hm! I'm glad of that. But I wasn't worrying. I've known Delavan a long time. I told him what I wanted, and knew I could bank on his choice. Are all your friends satisfied?"

"They're delighted," Tom nodded. "All they're aching for now, sir, is to get out on the first cruise."

"They'll have their wish this evening," laughed Mr. Baldwin. "Is there anything you want to ask me, Captain?"

"Nothing, unless you'll permit me to be a bit curious."

"That's a bad fault on this yacht," replied Joseph Baldwin, with a slight frown that quickly disappeared. "What is it you want to know?"

"I'm wondering, sir, why you had to send all the way east for officers for the 'Panther'?"

"Because I've had to get rid of two sets of officers," replied Mr. Baldwin, crisply. "One captain was too inquisitive, the other was incapable. Then I began to hear a good deal about your famous Motor Boat Club. That set me to corresponding with Delavan. He told me a lot more about you young men, and I couldn't get it out of my head that *you* were the sort of people I wanted."

"You weren't afraid on account of our being so – well, youthful?"

"I knew, if you'd suit Frank Delavan, you'd suit me. And I'm just as sure after having seen you all. Now, Captain Halstead, you'll be ready to sail at any time after seven this evening. That is the hour when my guests and I sit down to dinner aboard. At the time I'll give you your general sailing instructions. Remember, Mr. Costigan must be your pilot until you're out through the Golden Gate and clear of the coast."

"Yes, sir," assented Halstead, rising. "Any further orders, sir?"

"That is all, for the present, Captain."

Tom Halstead left the owner's suite and walked forward, filled with a wonderful sense of elation. He passed the pilot house just in time to see Joe Dawson coming up forward.

"Say, are we going to wake up, chum?" breathed young Dawson in his friend's ear.

"I don't believe we'll have to," laughed the young skipper, happily. "We're all right, I'm pretty sure, if we don't do something that greatly displeases the boat's owner. Thanks to Mr. Delavan, the owner of this craft is willing to believe, at the start, that we're all that's good and wonderful. But come into my cabin, old fellow, if you have the time. We'll dine together to-night."

Both motor boat boys sighed their supreme contentment as they dropped into arm-chairs facing each other. It was now so dark that Tom switched on the electric lights.

"How are the engines, Joe?" asked Tom, dropping into his old, friendly manner.

"Ready to start at a second's notice. And Jed's on duty there, waiting for the word."

"Gasoline?"

"Tanks bulging with it. Tom, this is a beautifully appointed boat below, and every store of every description is in place."

"That's the kind of a man I'm pretty sure Mr. Baldwin is," nodded Halstead.

Joe surveyed a row of speaking tubes that hung against the forward wall of the captain's room. He picked out one labeled "engine-room," pressing the button beneath it.

"Hello, sir," came the quick response, in Jed Prentiss's unmistakable tones.

"Hello, Mr. Prentiss," Joe returned. "How do you like it down there, on duty?"

"It's perfect!" responded Jed, almost dreamily. "Everything here but my own personal steward. I ain't sure but what *he'll* blow in, in a minute, and ask me what I'll have for dinner."

"Tell him we're scheduled to start at seven," suggested Halstead.

"I can start in seven seconds, if I'm asked to," promised Prentiss. "Anyway, I can have the propellers turning fast before you can get the anchor up. Crackey! I forgot that I have to supply even the power for hoisting anchor."

Twenty minutes later the two chums, who had begun their career by patching up an old steam launch down at the mouth of the Kennebec River, in Maine, were seated at table in the captain's cabin, doing justice to a meal that was but little short of sumptuous.

The chief steward himself, a man named Parkinson, served the young captain and chief engineer. He hovered about, as attentive as any hotel waiter or private butler could have been.

It was the second steward, however, who came in with the dessert for the two chief officers of the "Panther."

"What has become of the other steward?" inquired the young captain.

"Time for him, sir, to put on the finishing touches in the dining saloon," replied Collins, the second steward, who served also the junior officers and the crew.

"If we eat like this at every meal, Joe," sighed Halstead, contentedly, when the second steward had removed the last of the things, "we'll have to devote all the rest of the time to exercising off extra flesh. Let's get out on deck."

"All right. But I mean to be in the engine-room when the start is made."

At the side gangway the chums stepped quickly past, to make way for half a dozen men who were coming up over the side, while Mr. Costigan stood respectfully by to receive them. They were guests of the owner just coming on board for the night's cruise. One of these newcomers went directly to Mr. Baldwin's suite.

"Owner's compliments, sir," called Parkinson, softly, as he came hurrying after the young sailing master. "Mr. Baldwin wishes to see Captain Halstead on the jump, sir."

The call had come for the brisk beginning of the strangest duties in which young Halstead had ever been employed.

CHAPTER IV

HALSTEAD IS LET INTO A SECRET

"Captain Halstead, my friend, Mr. Jason Ross," announced Mr. Baldwin, crisply, as soon as the young skipper had closed the owner's door behind him.

Mr. Ross was a man of forty-five, and looked like a man who might be of much importance in the financial world. Yet *he* was presented to Halstead, for on a yacht the captain is considered next in importance to the owner.

Tom modestly greeted Mr. Ross.

"Sit down, Captain," snapped out the owner, though not unkindly. "Now, I've got to take you into my confidence a bit. Delavan's word for you makes me feel that I can safely do it."

Tom had only time to nod ere Mr. Baldwin went on, crisply:

"My guests are on board, with one exception. In a way, the exception is the most important one of us all. He isn't so very important in himself, but Gaston Giddings, though a very weak, foolish young man, happened to succeed his father in the principal control and presidency of the Sheepmen's National Bank. Young Giddings and the funds his bank can supply are of the utmost importance to my associates and myself in some big enterprises we are putting through. Do I make myself clear?"

"Wholly so, sir," Tom answered, quietly.

"Now, Giddings, besides being several kinds of plain and ornamental fool – no, I won't quite say that, but this weak young man has one fearful fault for the head of a bank – "

Joseph Baldwin paused in his rapid speech. He looked sharply at Mr. Ross an instant, then continued:

"Oh, well, Frank Delavan told me I could trust you and Dawson with anything from my yacht to my reputation. You understand that what I'm telling you, Captain, is absolutely confidential?"

"Of course, sir," responded Tom, quietly.

"Well, then, within the last three months young Giddings has, in some way we can't understand, fallen a victim to the opium habit. The young man is all but totally wrecked by the vile drug. How, or why, he started, none of us can understand. You see, a good many of us older men, who were fast friends of his father, have tried to stand by the young man. Two of to-night's party are directors in the Sheepmen's Bank. We've tried to get the bank's funds placed in interests that we control, so that young Giddings couldn't go very far wrong, by not having enough money left in his charge to wreck the bank. You follow me?"

"I – I think so, Mr. Baldwin."

"Truth to tell," pursued the owner, "I had planned – my friends on board with me – to go out ostensibly for one night, but really to be gone for several days. One of our friends is a specialist in the opium habit – Dr. Gray. We had hoped, on this trip, to plan some financial enterprises that would use up, for the present, the dangerously large balance at the Sheepmen's Bank. At the same time we were going to try to force young Giddings to agree to heroic medical treatment in order to overcome his fearful vice."

Tom Halstead remained silent, but attentive.

"Now, at the last moment," pursued Mr. Baldwin, "we hear that Giddings was seen in a closed carriage, evidently headed for Chinatown, that vile Oriental section of San Francisco, where the opium vice flourishes at its worst. And in Chinatown a man can disappear so completely that his friends can't find him again in years. Giddings was to be here to-night, but he's in a Chinatown opium den instead. If we appeal to the police, it'll all be in the newspapers. There'll be a scandal that will disgrace Giddings forever, start a run on the Sheepmen's Bank, and – though this is the least of our worries – will delay for some time the pushing of the big financial game in which my friends and

myself are interested. Now, we've got to find some way of getting at Giddings, and of bringing him on board without trouble or noise. I've told you this much, Captain Halstead, so that you'll understand the need of secrecy. If we can find Giddings, and get him out here, then we *must* bring him over the side and get him into his stateroom without his being seen by any of the crew on board, except, possibly, by one or two of your own comrades whom you think you can best trust."

"I can trust every one of 'em, sir," declared Captain Tom, promptly. "So will you, when you know them better."

"Then, Captain, before we make any move to find Giddings in his Chinatown hiding-place, and attempt to get him aboard this yacht, we must have all of the crew safely out of the way, save for your own personal friends among the officers."

"I can plan for the crew to go ashore," declared Tom Halstead. "I have only to state that you've decided to delay putting out to sea, and that you've been good enough to grant the men a night on shore at the theatre at your expense. That will take every one of them over the side. Do you want Mr. Costigan to go?"

"Why, I think Costigan is all right, but he isn't needed here, anyway, so he'd better go ashore also."

"Easily settled, then, Mr. Baldwin. I can send Mr. Costigan off in charge of the shore party. At what hour do you wish them all to return, sir?"

"Not a minute before midnight!"

"Very good, sir. I can tell Mr. Costigan that you've been called ashore, that you will dine there, and that you are very glad of this opportunity to give the older members of the crew a chance to enjoy themselves ashore."

"Excellent, indeed!" cried Mr. Baldwin, in a low tone. "What do you say, Ross?"

"If Captain Halstead can vouch so heartily for the silence and discretion of his own friends, then the plan ought to clear the decks so that we can get Giddings aboard – if we find him – without any comment or scandal at all," agreed Jason Ross.

Joseph Baldwin employed himself stripping a few banknotes from a roll that he drew from a trousers pocket.

"Give this money to Mr. Costigan, Captain, and tell him to see to it that the men have a good time on shore – though no drunkenness! And you, Captain Halstead, I trust to see to it that none but your own friends remain aboard."

Ten minutes later Captain Tom returned to the owner's suite to report that Third Officer Costigan and the crew, including the stewards and cooks, had gone ashore in the tender, Jeff Randolph running the boat in.

"How soon will Randolph be back?" asked Mr. Baldwin.

"Within ten minutes, sir."

"Then I shall want him to put Mr. Ross and myself ashore. We two must take up the seemingly impossible task of locating young Giddings in the heart of Chinatown's slums, and bring him here by force, yet without noise. Once we get him on board, and below, we can keep the young man quiet until morning, when we'll be well out on the ocean. Dr. Gray will attend to that."

"Are your friends going to remain on board, without dinner?" asked Halstead.

"No; they can go ashore and get dinner at a restaurant, returning presently. Mr. Randolph can keep the tender at the landing stage until they return. Then, as soon as he has brought our other friends aboard, Mr. Randolph can return for Ross and myself, when we get back. But Mr. Randolph must not let Costigan or the crew get aboard until after we've returned."

"I'll make his instructions clear on that point," nodded Tom.

"That is all, then. Let me know when the tender returns."

"Hold on, a moment, Baldwin," interposed Mr. Ross.

"Well?"

"Baldwin, neither of us is in what might be called the pink of condition, and young Giddings may put up a fight in his half-crazed way. Don't we need a little real brawn with us?"

"Taking Captain Halstead with us, do you mean?"

"That was the idea that had come into my head," nodded Mr. Ross.

"Yes; it would be an excellent idea. Captain, you will go with us. Leave your first officer in command here until we return."

"Very good, sir."

Tom Halstead saluted, then withdrew. He gave his orders quickly, not deeming it necessary to mention any phase of the story of young Gaston Giddings to his comrades of the Motor Boat Club.

As soon as the launch was alongside Tom hastened to inform Mr. Baldwin. The entire party thereupon came out on deck, gathering at the side gangway. They speedily embarked in the tender, in which Jeff sat where he could handle both engine and steering gear.

"Your instructions are clear, Mr. Perkins?" called Tom Halstead, softly, from the launch.

"Quite clear, sir," Ab replied. "The instructions will be followed to the letter."

"Shove off, then," Tom commanded. "To the landing stage, Mr. Randolph."

It would have been almost laughable, to anyone who had witnessed the frolicsome motor boat boys going through their hazing affair of the forenoon, had he now been at hand to hear them using the stately "mister" and "sir" with all the gravity of naval officers.

Jeff speedily had the party ashore.

Twenty minutes later a closed cab rolled slowly in at one corner of gayly-lighted, malodorous Chinatown. The vehicle contained Messrs. Baldwin and Ross and young Captain Tom Halstead. In this poisonous atmosphere they sought a young human wreck, Gaston Giddings.

CHAPTER V

A HUNT IN THE UNDER-WORLD

During the ride from the water front Captain Tom Halstead had sat on the front seat of the cab, quiet and reserved.

Now, as they entered the outer confines of Chinatown, Halstead leaned slightly forward, peering out at the shops and at the queer Oriental jumble, mixed here and there with white people, that thronged the narrow sidewalks.

"Are you headed for any particular place, sir?" queried the young skipper, after a few moments.

"No," admitted Mr. Baldwin. "I know nothing of Chinatown. We must drive through, first of all, at a venture. Presently an idea may come to us. Whatever we do, our plans must soon be formed. If I dared speak to a police officer – but the risk is too great."

"There's a restaurant," murmured the boy, suddenly. "It looks like a big and clean place. Why don't you and Mr. Ross slip in there, have some tea or something, and let me prowl about in these queer, crooked streets for a few minutes? Chinatown is only a few blocks in extent, I understand. I may be able to learn something that way, unless you have a better plan, sir."

"I am afraid you'll run into danger, alone in this barbarous crowd," objected Mr. Baldwin.

"I'm not in the least afraid," smiled Tom, confidently. "Two prosperous looking men like you might attract attention, but, as for me, the people hereabouts will think only that I'm some young sailor ashore for a lark. Shall I stop the cab, sir?"

"Yes," agreed Joseph Baldwin, though he spoke doubtfully.

Tom's hand shot up at once, grabbing the check string. The driver pulled up his horses, then came to the door, opening it.

"This will be as good a place for you to remain, driver, as anywhere," said Halstead, as he stepped out. Then he turned, waiting for Messrs. Baldwin and Ross to alight.

"Shall I find you in that restaurant, sir?" the young skipper inquired.

"Yes; but don't be too long away, Halstead, or we shall be more uneasy than ever."

"Trust a sailor to take care of himself in any crowd, sir," laughed Tom Halstead, jauntily. With that he stepped off, at a more rolling gait than he usually employed on shore.

The young motor boat captain carried in his mind a good personal description of Gaston Giddings. He had secured this from Mr. Baldwin before leaving the yacht.

"Ugh! The smell here is worse than in New York's Chinatown," Tom told himself, disgustedly.

From upper windows of some of the buildings that lined the narrow, dirty streets came the squawkings of Chinese fiddles and other discordant "musical" instruments of a wholly Oriental type. There seemed to be two or three joss-houses, or temples, in every short block. On the street floors, however, stores offering all kinds of Chinese merchandise were most common. Tom suspected that the gambling places and opium joints lay in the rear of these stores.

"Want a guide to Chinatown? Show ye everything, boss, for two dollars. Show ye every real sight in Chinatown," appealed a seedy, dirty, young white man who now held Tom by one sleeve.

"Anything really worth seeing?" asked Halstead, smilingly.

"Oh, *everything* worth seeing," responded the seedy guide, with a wide wave of one arm. "Best two dollars' worth you ever had. Most curious sights you ever saw in any part of the world. Sailor, ain't ye?"

"Yes."

"Sailors are my specialty," declared the seedy guide, grimly. "Come, ye'd better haul up the two dollars and let me take you about."

"What about opium joints, for instance?" asked Tom Halstead, speaking as though he had not enthused much as yet.

"I know 'em all," asserted the seedy guide, eagerly. "Want to smoke the opium pipe?"

"Can't say," replied Tom, vaguely. "Yet, if I do go around with you, you've got to take me to the really swell opium places."

"Oh, I can do it – better'n any other guide in Chinatown," promised the fellow, quickly. "Come, just hand over the two dollars, and see what I can show you."

With a great pretense of reluctance Captain Tom produced four half dollars, which he handed to the guide.

"Remember, now," he said, "I want what you might call the aristocratic places."

"If ye ain't satisfied," promised the guide, glibly, "then ye'll get your money back."

"Go ahead, then, but mind what I told you."

Through dark alleyways, or through stores into rear apartments, Halstead followed his conductor. In rapid succession he passed in and out of half a dozen opium joints. One was as much like another as two kernels of wheat resemble each other.

In each place there was the same outer room, then the same bunk-room, an apartment fitted up with bunks at the sides. It was in these rooms that the smoking was done. The intending smoker stretched himself out in a bunk, while a Chinese attendant brought lamp and kit. A tiny ball of opium was quickly lighted – "cooked" – at the lamp's flame. Then this glowing pellet of opium was thrust into the bowl of an opium pipe, and the latter handed to the smoker in the bunk. The smoker consumed his pellet after two or three whiffs. After smoking three or four pipes, most of the smokers succumbed, falling back in a torpid sleep.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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