

Hancock Harrie Irving

**The Motor Boat Club off
Long Island: or, A Daring
Marine Game at Racing Speed**



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H. Irving Hancock

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CHAPTER I

A BREATHLESS MOMENT IN THE FOG

CLA-A-ANG! Cla-a-ang!

The “Rocket,” a sixty-foot motor cruiser, her engine slowed down to ten miles an hour, had just moved out of comparatively clear water into a thickish bank of fog. The bell, probably on board a sailing craft, had just been heard for the first time off the starboard bow of the cruiser, and close at hand.

Joe Dawson, forward lookout on the “Rocket,” leaned ahead, framing his mouth with his hands as he shouted:

“Ahoy, there! Keep to your own port, captain!”

Cla-a-ang! Cla-a-ang!

The sound of the bell was appallingly nearer, now, seemingly almost upon the motor boat.

Captain Tom Halstead, at the “Rocket’s” wheel, abaft of midship, sounded a shrill warning from his craft’s auto whistle.

Too-oot!

At the same time Halstead threw his own wheel over to go to port of the bell-ringing stranger.

It was a fog that seemed to grow denser with every foot of headway. The water at the hull alongside was barely visible.

Then through the mist ahead shot the tip of a bowsprit. Despite the signals, or through misunderstanding them, the sailing vessel was keeping to her course. She was due either to ram the “Rocket,” or to be rammed by that agile little cruising craft.

There was but one thing to do – to reverse the engine with lightning speed. The engine controls lay convenient to the young skipper’s hand and feet as he stood by the wheel. He was just reaching for the reversing lever, in fact, when, from well aft sounded another boy’s warning:

“Racing craft about to ram your port quarter, captain!”

While, from one of the two men passengers rose an almost despairing shriek:

“I can’t stand this sort of thing. I’d sooner jump overboard!”

Captain Tom, however, without betraying any excitement, sprang so that he could easily glance astern. Instead of the reversing gear, he grabbed for the speed ahead. One glance aft showed him a long, narrow motor craft diving out of the fog. To reverse would mean a collision with the motor boat; to go ahead would mean a smash against the sailing craft. Whatever was to be done had to be thought out at electric speed, all in a second.

Tom’s judgment was for speed ahead. In that sudden emergency he increased the fog speed greatly, at the same time throwing his wheel over as far as it would go.

Thus he escaped a violent meeting with the racing craft, but ranged up alongside of the sailing vessel, a schooner that now appeared dimly, in an almost ghostly light, her rail, soon parallel with the “Rocket’s,” being only a few yards away.

“You lobster smack!” cried Joe, contemptuously. “Why do you ship lubbers for officers?”

The stupid handling that the sailing craft had displayed was enough to rouse anger in the mind of anyone endangered by the gross carelessness.

“Get out, you floating oil-stove!” came back, sullenly, from the sailing craft’s quarter deck. “Your gasoline dories ought to be confined to duck ponds.”

Joe grinned. His wrath was easily dissipated at any time. Anyway, young Captain Halstead, swiftly wearing away to port and again slowing down the speed, put an end to conversation with the stranger.

In this manœuvre the unknown racing motor craft had, of course, been given ample room, and was doubtless well out of reach by this time. But Jed Prentiss, his face still a trifle white, stood on the same spot on the after deck from which he had sounded warning of the swift, narrow boat’s coming.

“Now, Moddridge,” urged a heavy, easy, persuasive voice, “get a grip on yourself and be a man. You see for yourself how easily our new skipper carries himself and the boat in a tight squeeze.”

“But my dear Delavan,” protested the one addressed as Moddridge, “I simply can’t stand this sort of thing. My nerves – ”

“Your nerves have always been the master of a fool slave,” retorted Mr. Delavan, good humoredly. “Come, be born again, and rule your nerves and your wits.”

“That scooter acted like a regular pirate,” uttered Jed Prentiss, under his breath. “Rushing over the old ocean, and never a sound from her whistle or bell!”

Mr. Francis Delavan, owner of the “Rocket,” tall, broad-shouldered, rosy-cheeked and athletic looking despite his fifty years, stepped across the short after deck, going up the short flight of steps at starboard and posting himself on the bridge deck beside Skipper Tom.

“What’s your speed now, captain?” inquired the owner.

“Slowed down to six, sir,” replied young Halstead, punctuating his reply by sounding the auto whistle.

“That’s a wise speed, captain,” nodded the owner. “I haven’t been in as thick a fog as this all season.”

“Are you going to stay here a little while, sir?” queried Tom.

“Why? Anything I can do for you?”

“You might sound the whistle, every thirty seconds, sir, if you will. That will give me a much better chance to pay heed to the lookouts.”

“All right, captain,” laughed the owner, drawing out a handsome watch. “If I make the intervals forty, instead of thirty seconds, put me in irons as soon as you like.”

Captain Tom smiled, but made no other reply. All the young sailing master’s attention was centered on the work in hand. There is nothing at all like play about handling a sixty-foot craft in such a fog. As the incident just closed had shown, there are other lives than those of one’s own sailing party that are at stake in a possible collision in the fog.

“Are you going to try to keep out in this fog, sir?” asked Halstead, some two minutes later.

“Yes,” came the owner’s decisive answer. “Though Moddridge doesn’t appear to think so, it is well worth while to risk big stakes on a meeting with the big ‘Kaiser Wilhelm.’ It may be worth a small fortune to me.”

“There are times when money doesn’t mean much to me,” put in Eben Moddridge, who had followed his friend up to the bridge deck, which, on the “Rocket,” instead of being forward, was somewhat abaft of amidships.

Moddridge was a pale, thin, hollow-cheeked, nervous looking man of forty, and of a height of five feet four. Not much to look at was Mr. Moddridge, yet, in his own way, he was a good deal of a power in Wall Street.

“Moddridge,” retorted the owner, firmly, “this is a time when you can do only one useful thing. Go below and turn in. I’ll wake you when the fog has lifted.”

“What? I lie down?” demanded Eben Moddridge, in a startled voice. “And then very likely go down to the fishes without ever waking up?”

“We haven’t that kind of a captain, now,” replied Mr. Delavan, easily. “You just saw how easily he pulled the ‘Rocket’ out of a dangerous trap. If Captain Bill Hartley had stood in Halstead’s place we’d have been smashed fore and aft.”

“Hartley was an excellent skipper,” retorted Moddridge, peevishly. “He was a most careful man. He never would have gone into a fog. He wouldn’t take a chance of being wrecked.”

“That was why I had to get rid of him, Eben,” retorted Mr. Delavan. “Hartley was an old maid, who never ought to have tried to follow the sea. If it looked like rain he’d run for harbor and drop anchor.”

“A very wise and careful sailing master,” insisted Mr. Moddridge.

“Yes; Hartley had nerves to pretty near match your own,” mocked Mr. Delavan. “But he wasn’t the kind of man for the kind of work we have in hand nowadays. And now, Moddridge, I know that your talk, and mine, is bothering Captain Halstead. Go down aft again, and don’t bother the lookout by talking to him. Be a good fellow.”

Muttering, and with many shakings of the head, the smaller man obeyed. He would try to be brave, but nothing could conceal from Eben Moddridge the certainty that they were shortly to be sunk.

“The ‘Kaiser’ could slip in by us easily, in this mean fog,” declared Mr. Delavan.

“Not if she keeps to her usual course on this part of the trip,” Halstead answered. “She’d be in these waters in passing, and we haven’t heard any fog-whistle heavy enough to come from a craft of that size.”

All these minutes the owner, who possessed the faculty of keeping his mind on two things at once, had not forgotten to sound the auto whistle at regular intervals.

“I think, sir,” Tom spoke presently, “I had better keep to mere headway now.”

“Do so, if that’s your best judgment,” nodded Francis Delavan. “But remember, captain, that to-day’s game is one that has to be played in earnest.”

“We won’t miss the ‘Kaiser Wilhelm,’ if she comes in soon, and follows her usual course,” Halstead answered.

Though Tom still kept one hand on the wheel, the “Rocket” seemed almost to rest motionless on the gentle swell.

It was an August day. The motor craft, a handsome sixty-foot affair of racing build and with powerful engines, lay on the light, fog-covered swell some twelve miles nearly due south of Shinnecock Bay on the southern coast of Long Island.

Readers of former narratives in this series will remember how Mr. Prescott, a Boston broker, organized the Motor Boat Club among the sea-trained boys at the mouth of the Kennebec River, in Maine.

Tom Halstead was fleet captain of the Club, and Joe Dawson the fleet engineer. They were the two most skilled members.

Readers will also remember how these two sixteen-year-old handlers of motor boats were sent by Mr. Prescott to enter the sea-going service of Horace Dunstan, a wealthy resident of the island of Nantucket, south of Cape Cod. It will be remembered how Tom Halstead and Joe Dawson, with Jed Prentiss, a Nantucket boy, as comrade, went through a series of dangerous yet exhilarating adventures which resulted in the detection and capture by the United States authorities of a crew of filibusters who were attempting to smuggle out of the country arms and ammunition intended for revolutionists in the republic of Honduras. It was while at Nantucket that these three members of the Motor Boat Club had also, after going through a maze of search and adventure, discovered the missing Dunstan heir and insured to the latter a great inheritance that Master Ted Dunstan had been upon the point of losing.

And now we find the same three young Americans aboard the “Rocket,” a somewhat larger craft than either of the others that Captain Tom Halstead had handled. It will not take long to account for the presence of the trio aboard this craft in Long Island waters.

The “Meteor,” Horace Dunstan’s boat at Nantucket, was now in charge of two Nantucket boys for whom Jed had secured membership in the Motor Boat Club. This was the first day for Tom, Joe and Jed aboard the “Rocket.”

Francis Delavan, the owner, was one of the men who make the History of Money in Wall Street. Besides being a daring operator there Delavan was also the president of and a big stockholder in the Portchester and Youngstown Railroad, more commonly known as the P. & Y. Now, the P. & Y., while one of the smaller railroads of the country, was, on account of its connections, a property of considerable value.

Mr. Delavan was not one of the multi-millionaires who keep palatial summer homes on the south side of Long Island. Just at present he contented himself with a suite of rooms at the Eagle House in East Hampton, spending some days of every week in New York City.

The “Rocket’s” former captain, Hartley, was entirely too timorous and cautious a master to suit an owner who loved a spice of danger and adventure on the salt water. So Mr. Delavan had felt obliged to let Captain Hartley go. Griggs, the former engineer, had not been over-brave, either. Griggs had had trouble with a rough character on shore, and, upon being threatened by him with serious bodily harm, had promptly deserted his post on the “Rocket,” going to parts unknown.

Thus, at the time when the “Rocket” was laid up, and yet most urgently needed by her owner, Mr. Delavan had met his friend Mr. Prescott in New York. What followed was that Tom, Joe and Jed had been wired to leave Nantucket, if convenient for Mr. Dunstan, and proceed at once to Shinnecock Bay. As two young friends of Jed’s had been trained well enough to be able to handle the “Meteor” satisfactorily, Tom, Joe and Jed had traveled to Long Island with all speed. This was their first forenoon aboard the “Rocket,” and it was destined to prove a lively one.

All three were in their natty, sea-going, brass-buttoned blue uniforms of the Motor Boat Club. Each wore an officer’s visored cap. Jed, when serving as steward, changed his blue to white duck, but he also served frequently in engine room or on deck.

Just now, as fore and aft lookouts were needed, and as the big motor was running smoothly, control of the engine was managed through the deck-gear near the steering wheel.

For another half-hour the “Rocket” barely moved over the water, though now her nose was pointed east, in the track of in-coming steamships. Mr. Moddridge had quieted down enough to stretch himself in one of the wicker chairs on the low after deck, where he chewed nervously at the end of a mild cigar that was seldom lighted. In this time no other craft came near them, or, if it did, failed to sound fog signals.

And now the fog was lifting slowly. The lookouts were able to see over the waters for a distance of some two hundred feet at least.

“A morning fog, in August, off the Long Island coast, isn’t likely to last long,” said Mr. Delavan. “In half an hour more you may be able to see the horizon on every side.”

“I hope so,” nodded Captain Tom. “Fog has few delights for the sailor. Without fog we could make out a huge craft like the ‘Kaiser’ at a great distance. Listen, sir! Did you hear that?”

Again the sound came, though faintly, from far away.

Whoo-oo-oo! whoo-oo-oo! It was a hoarse, deep-throated, powerful blast on a fog-whistle.

“That comes from some big craft, sir; as like as not the ‘Kaiser Wilhelm der Grosse.’”

“Have you ever seen that steamship?”

“No, sir; but I’ve studied her pictures. I think I’d know her if I saw her.”

“I’m hoping and praying that you do see her this day,” rejoined Mr. Delavan. “I’ve a pretty big barrel of money at stake on seeing that steamship. Well, she isn’t in sight now, so I’m going below to get some cigars.”

His easy manner was in sharp contrast to the fidgeting nervousness of Eben Moddridge. As soon as the owner had vanished into the cabin the nervous one almost trotted up onto the bridge deck.

“You haven’t any means of knowing, for a certainty, that that is the ‘Kaiser Wilhelm?’” asked Mr. Moddridge, sharply.

“No, sir; I can only hope that it is,” Captain Tom responded.

“I hope it’s the ‘Kaiser’; I hope it is, I hope it is,” cried Mr. Moddridge. As further evidence of the excited state of his mind that gentleman commenced to pace the bridge deck, from side to side, with quick, agitated steps.

“Wonder why on earth both are so eager for a glimpse of one of the biggest passenger ships afloat?” wondered Halstead, attending, now, to the whistle at two-minute intervals, as well as steering. “But, pshaw! It’s none of my business why the owner and his friend want or don’t want things. That’s their own affair. Stick to your wheel and your other duties, Tom, old fellow!”

Yet, though Halstead honestly tried to drive the matter out of his mind, it was human nature that he should still wonder and catch himself making all sorts of guesses. The words “a fortune” exert a strong magic over most human minds. Tom had heard the owner declare that a fortune hung in the balance on this day’s work.

“Well, if there is any fortune at stake on my giving these gentlemen a glimpse of the ‘Kaiser Wilhelm,’” Halstead told himself, “it’s my sole business to see that I give them the look-across at the big ship. That’s all I need to know.”

Whatever large steam craft it was that was sounding the fog-horn slightly south of a due east line from the “Rocket,” she was coming nearer with every minute. The increase in the volume of sound told that much.

“How are we making the stranger, Halstead?” inquired Mr. Delavan, returning to the bridge deck, a lighted cigar between his teeth. He dropped into a comfortable arm-chair.

“She’s coming nearer, sir, and we can see for three or four hundred feet, now, in every direction. There’s but a slight chance of the vessel getting by us.”

“What ails you, Moddridge?” demanded Mr. Delavan, turning and gazing wonderingly at his friend.

“I’m nervous, of course,” returned that gentleman.

“Pshaw! Sit down and let your nerves rest.”

“But I can’t!”

“Stand up, then,” pursued Mr. Delavan, coolly. “But you’re tiring yourself out, Moddridge, with that jerky gait over such a short course.”

“Delavan, have you no mind, no nerves?” cried Moddridge, raspily. “When you stop to think of the great amounts of money that are at stake. When you – ”

Eben Moddridge paused, out of breath.

“Well?” insisted Mr. Delavan, placidly.

“Oh, pshaw!” snapped the nervous one. “There’s no use in talking to you, or trying to make you understand. You’ve no imagination.”

“For which I’m very thankful,” responded the owner, blowing out a cloud of smoke.

The fog was lifting more and more, the sun’s rays trying to pierce what was left of the haze.

“You may as well come in, lookouts,” hailed Captain Tom.

“Jed, if you’re through with deck duty,” called Mr. Delavan, “suppose you begin to think of getting lunch.”

“All right, sir,” Prentiss answered, and disappeared.

“Oh, Delavan, man,” groaned Mr. Moddridge, “how on earth can you talk about eating when everything lies at stake as it does?”

“Why, after I get the word,” rejoined the owner, “I shall be hungry enough to eat – anything.”

“But what if the news be of the worst kind?”

“Let us hope it won’t be, Moddridge.”

“Yet, if it is? You don’t mean to say, Delavan, that you could think of eating *then*?”

“Confound you, man,” drawled Mr. Delavan. “What do you think my stomach knows about news?”

The sounding of the fog-horn had died out some minutes ago, as the vanishing fog rolled further and further away. And now, Tom, gazing keenly ahead, saw a big black hull rapidly emerge out of a bank of fog more than a mile away. He looked sharply for a few seconds. Then —

“Gentlemen,” announced the young skipper, pointing, “that craft over to the eastward is, I think, the ‘Kaiser Wilhelm der Grosse.’”

CHAPTER II

A WHIFF OF FORTUNE

MR. DELAVAN immediately raised a pair of marine glasses to his eyes, taking a long, careful look at the great hull.

“Yes; that’s the ‘Kaiser,’” he agreed.

“There’s a smaller craft, astern, that may interest you also, sir,” reported Jed, from the after deck.

Mr. Delavan turned quickly, though not with such a start as did his friend, Moddridge.

Astern, or, rather, over the port quarter, appeared a long, narrow racing hull. It was evidently the same motor craft that had so nearly rammed them in the deep fog.

“Confound that hoodoo boat,” muttered Mr. Delavan, in a low tone, to his companion. “I’d give quite a bit to know who are aboard that craft.”

“S-s-so would I,” stammered Moddridge. “It looks queer. Whoever they are, they’re dogging us, of course.”

“That’s what I’d like to know,” returned Delavan, musingly.

“Shall I keep to the same course, sir?” asked Captain Tom, as soon as his employer looked around.

“Why, now, I’ll tell you what I want you to do, captain,” answered the owner. “Run out towards the ‘Kaiser,’ though you needn’t be at pains to make it too plain that you’re seeking the big ship. After you get the ‘Rocket’ somewhat near, take a wide, sweeping turn to landward of the big craft. Run fairly near, keeping your port hull about parallel with the ‘Kaiser’s’ starboard. Run alongside for a little distance, until your orders are changed. Moddridge and I are going down into the cabin, to take our stations at port-holes. Prentiss will stand by the cabin doorway to pass up, in a low voice, any orders that I may give him for you. Is that all clear, captain?”

“Quite clear, sir.”

“Then come below, Moddridge,” continued the owner, turning to his friend. “And for goodness’ sake, man, if you can, behave differently. Don’t let your legs shake so under you.”

“I c-c-can’t help it,” stammered the smaller man, nervously.

“You’re not going to the hangman, man!” laughed Mr. Delavan, jovially, as he led the way below.

“I reckon I’d better drop down into the engine room for signals, hadn’t I?” proposed Dawson. Tom nodded, and his chum vanished, though his head soon reappeared, framed in the engine room hatchway. The beauty of a gasoline motor engine is that when all is running smoothly and no signals from the bridge are to be expected, the engineer may spend much of his time up on deck. On the bridge deck, near the wheel, are “controls” by means of which the helmsman can change the speeds, stop or reverse at will.

As Captain Tom headed in the direction ordered he heard Jed reporting to the owner that the long racing boat astern did not appear to be making any efforts to overtake the “Rocket” or to reach the “Kaiser Wilhelm.” Instead, the racing boat seemed to be playing wholly a waiting game. This racing craft was about thirty-two to thirty-five feet long. She was not fitted for cruising, but only for fast spurts. She had, instead of a cabin, a deck-over hood forward that protected her engine and galley from the spray.

The “Kaiser Wilhelm” being one of the swiftest of the ocean grayhounds, and the “Rocket” now making at least sixteen miles an hour, it was not long before young Halstead was ready to carry out the second part of his sailing orders.

He steered the “Rocket” so that she made a wide sweep around, then came up parallel with the big ocean steamship. There was about four hundred feet of water between the big hull and the little one as the two craft ran along parallel.

Tom yanked the bell-pull for more speed. This Joe provided, looking up once in a while to make sure that he was keeping up with the swift “Kaiser Wilhelm.”

“Ask Mr. Delavan if we’re running all right, Jed,” requested the young captain.

“Yes,” nodded Jed, after repeating the message without moving.

The big steamship’s deck was covered with passengers, most of them crowding fairly close to the starboard rail. It was plain that the voyagers felt some curiosity regarding this dapper, trim little cruising craft that kept so handily along with the racing grayhound.

There was a great fluttering of handkerchiefs, which Tom acknowledged by several short blasts on the auto whistle. The “Kaiser’s” heavy whistle responded.

“That’s all. Mr. Delavan says to head about for East Hampton,” Jed reported.

With a parting toot from the whistle, Halstead altered the course.

“Make your best speed, captain,” was the next order young Prentiss transmitted.

So it was not long before the “Kaiser” and the “Rocket” were some miles apart. Mr. Delavan came on deck, smiling. Tom tried not to wonder, though he could not help guessing what the Wall Street magnate could have accomplished by means of this brief, eventless cruise alongside the larger vessel.

But Mr. Moddridge! His face was positively wreathed in smiles. All his fears seemed to have vanished. The smaller man was still nervous, but it was the agitation of intense joy.

“It’s all right, Halstead,” beamed Mr. Delavan.

“I suppose it must be, sir,” smiled the youthful skipper.

“You’re puzzled, aren’t you, lad?”

“Why, I’m trying not to be, as, of course, it’s none of my business.”

“Of course it isn’t,” laughed Mr. Moddridge, uneasily. “But what wouldn’t he give to know, Delavan?”

“Why, I can give you a hint or two,” smiled the big, good-natured man.

“Don’t you say anything,” protested Moddridge, paling.

“Nonsense,” laughed Mr. Delavan. “Halstead, did you notice one man who stood at the rail of the big craft? A man tall and very broad-shouldered, a man of seventy, with considerable of a stoop, but with the nose and eyes that make one think of an eagle? His clothes fitted him loosely. He isn’t what you’d call a man of fashion, but a man whom, once you saw him, you’d never forget.”

“And at his right hand stood a man who looked like a clergyman?” inquired Halstead.

“I see you marked the man. Do you know who he is?”

“No, sir, though I’m sure I’ve seen his portrait in the newspapers.”

“H’m! I guess you have,” chuckled Mr. Delavan. “Well, that’s Gordon, the great man in the steel world, the colossal banker, the man who lends nations money.”

“You didn’t make this trip just to make sure that he was aboard?” Tom hazarded.

“Of course not, captain. I had that information days ago, by cable. But Gordon has been doing big things abroad, things that will rouse the world’s market and shake fortunes up or down. By tomorrow morning Wall Street will be seething, just on guesses as to what Gordon has done in Paris and what speculations he’ll make, now that he has returned.”

“Delavan!” cried Moddridge, sharply. “I protest. Not another word.”

“Nonsense!” retorted the big man, cheerily. “Halstead, whoever makes the right guess as to what big money deals Gordon has arranged abroad can make barrels of money in Wall Street during the next two or three days. Those who guess wrong will lose their money. Money will be made, and money will be lost in Wall Street, during the next few days – all on guessing which way Gordon’s cat jumped in Paris.”

“And all the while no one will *know*, except Mr. Gordon himself?” smiled Tom Halstead.

“That’s the point,” chuckled Francis Delavan, contentedly.

“S-s-stop!” cried Moddridge, warningly. But his large friend, disregarding him utterly, continued:

“On that same ship a man came over whom Moddridge and I trust. Our man has a great knack for drawing people out. It was his task to talk with Gordon at every good opportunity, and to get from the great man some indication as to the real news. Our man was paid by us, and paid well, but he also gets a substantial share of the profits we hope to make. He has made every effort to get a tip from Gordon, and it was that information that our man, by two or three simple movements, signaled to us.”

“And now I suppose you’re going to unbosom yourself, and tell this young boat-handler just what our information is?” groaned Eben Moddridge.

“No, I am not,” grinned Mr. Delavan. “I don’t believe Halstead even cares a straw about knowing. If he had our information he isn’t the sort of lad who’d venture his little savings in the vortex of Wall Street speculation.”

“Thank you. You’ve gauged me rightly, sir,” laughed Halstead.

“But now you can guess why I’m so anxious to reach East Hampton just as early as you can possibly get us in,” continued Mr. Delavan. “I have a long distance telephone wire of the main trunk line, all the way to offices in New York, reserved for my instant use. One minute after I reach the telephone booth my orders will be known by my secret agents in New York. To-morrow morning Wall Street will seethe and boil over Gordon’s return, but my agents – our agents, for Moddridge is in it – will have their orders in time to do an hour or two of effective work before the Stock Exchange closes this afternoon. Now, you understand, captain, why I want to crowd on every fraction of speed to reach East Hampton.”

“Joe Dawson is working the motor for every bit of speed,” Captain Tom replied, quietly.

Moddridge, plucking at his friend’s sleeve, drew him aside to whisper:

“No matter how well you may like the boy, Delavan, you had no business to tell him all that you did.”

“Nonsense,” replied the owner, in a voice loud enough to reach the young skipper’s ears. “Prescott knows this young chap like a book. Prescott assured me that there isn’t a tighter-mouthed, or more loyal, dependable young fellow in the world. When a young man is sailing your boat on rush business he should have some idea of what he’s doing and why he’s doing it.”

The “Rocket” was now going at a full twenty-five miles an hour, her powerful, compact engine fairly throbbing with the work. While the boat might have been pushed two miles an hour faster, Dawson did not think it wise to attempt it except for life and death business.

The racing boat that they had noted astern was now somewhat ahead. This craft now turned, came back at rushing speed, circled about the “Rocket” in safe seaway, then started ahead again.

“Confound that boat,” grumbled Mr. Delavan, staring hard at the decked-over hood, “I’d like to know whether the people I suspect are hidden under that hood.”

“Looks as though the boat meant to follow us into East Hampton, doesn’t it, sir?” Halstead conjectured.

“I may as well tell you, Halstead – ”

“Delavan! *Can’t* you be silent?” groaned Moddridge.

“I may as well tell you,” resumed the easygoing owner, “that the boat ahead probably carries, concealed, two daring Wall Street operators, or their spies, who, at any cost, want the very information that Moddridge and I possess. They must have watched our approach to the ‘Kaiser’ through a glass, and now they’ve sped close to us in the effort to see whether they could guess anything from our faces. Their next moves will be to keep with us going in, and even to attempt to overhear what we may telephone to New York.”

“They’d rather steal your news than get their own honestly, would they?” muttered Halstead. “A good many people are like that about everything, I guess.”

The racing craft had gained at least a quarter of a mile in the race for East Hampton. Jed had just gone below to spread lunch for the owner and guest when the racing boat was seen to be slowing down. It was not long before she lay almost motionless on the rolling surface of the ocean.

“What’s that they’re doing?” cried Mr. Delavan, as the watchers saw a piece of bunting flutter up to the head of the single short mast of the racing craft.

“The United States flag, field down,” replied keen-eyed Halstead.

“The signal of distress?”

“Yes, sir.”

Francis Delavan’s round, good-humored face betrayed instant signs of uneasiness, mingled with disgust.

“Captain Halstead, do we have to heed that signal?” he demanded. “That is, are we *obliged* to pay heed?”

“The laws of the ocean compel us to go close and hail her,” replied Tom, altering the “Rocket’s” course slightly, so as to run near the motionless boat.

“It’s a trick,” grumbled Mr. Delavan. “They’ll claim that their engine has broken down. They’ll want to demand a tow.”

“Do you want us to extend any help?” Tom inquired.

“Not unless we’re obliged to. But, of course, captain, neither you nor I can flagrantly defy the laws of navigation.”

“Luncheon is ready, gentlemen,” called Jed, from the deck below.

“Oh, bother luncheon!” muttered Moddridge.

“Not so, my dear fellow,” retorted Delavan, his old, easy manner returning. “We have much work to do, my dear fellow, and we must keep our furnaces running. Luncheon is the best of ideas. Come along. Captain, I look to you to guard my interests.”

Just as the “Rocket,” her speed lessened, ran up close to the racing craft, Mr. Delavan disappeared into the cabin, almost dragging his friend and guest after him.

In the cockpit of the speed boat appeared only two men, both of a rough, seafaring type, clad in oilskins and sou’westers. There might, however, be several other men concealed around the motor under the decked-over hood.

“Boat ahoy!” hailed Captain Tom, running fairly close, then stopping speed and reversing for a moment. “What’s the cause of your signal?”

“Engine broken down,” responded one of the men aboard the other boat.

“Well, you’re in no danger,” was Captain Halstead’s smiling answer. “You’re riding on a smooth sea.”

“But we can’t stay out here on the open ocean,” came the reply across the water. “You’re the only other craft near enough to help. We ask you to tow us into port.”

“We’re in a hurry,” replied Halstead. “Really, we can’t spare the speed.”

“But we’re in distress,” argued the man in the other boat. “We ask you for a tow that you’re quite able to give. What’s the answer?”

“*That*,” retorted Skipper Tom. He pointed at the mast of the “disabled” craft, to which was rigged a small, furled mainsail. “The wind is right, and you can easily make port, even under a small spread of canvas. You’re not in actual distress, and we *are* in haste. Good-bye!”

Joe’s grinning face appeared at the engine room hatchway for a moment, though it vanished below as the half-speed ahead bell rang. The “Rocket” forged ahead, followed by ugly words from the racing craft.

“Neatly done, Halstead,” greeted the voice of Mr. Delavan, as that gentleman, holding a napkin, appeared at the cabin door below for an instant. “I heard it all.”

“If that fellow hadn’t had his canvas rigged we might have had to stand by him,” replied Halstead.

A few minutes later it was seen that the racing craft was coming in slowly, under that small sail. It looked probable, then, that the break in her engine had been genuine.

Going at full speed, the “Rocket” was not long in making Shinnecock Bay. Soon afterward the young captain ran his craft in at a pier, on which stood a waiting automobile.

“I’ll be back for the rest of my lunch soon, steward,” announced the owner, stepping ashore. He entered the automobile, and was whirled away through the streets of East Hampton. Mr. Moddridge remained in the cabin, though he played nervously with knife and fork, eating little.

In fifteen minutes Francis Delavan returned, walking lazily from the touring car to the deck of his boat, his face expressive, now, of indolent content.

“Take us out a little way, captain,” requested the owner. “We want some good, cool sea air in which to finish the meal, eh, Moddridge?”

“I – I’m too excited to eat,” protested the smaller man. “Tell me, is everything all right at the New York end?”

“Oh, yes, I fancy so,” drawled the owner. “Steward, some more of that excellent salad, if you please.”

As Captain Tom slipped his craft out of Shinnecock Bay once more they made out the mysterious speed boat, still under sail and at a distance, making slowly for the Long Island coast.

“Whatever those fellows have guessed at or discovered,” chuckled Mr. Delavan, glancing at the other boat and then at his watch, as he came on deck, “they can’t hope to reach a telephone in time to catch the Stock Exchange open to-day. Good! Prentiss, come up here. Call Dawson aft if he can leave his engine.”

As the little group met near the wheel Francis Delavan drew out a pocket-book, which he opened.

“Young gentlemen,” he observed, “I believe Moddridge and I have been able to play a most important game in the money world to-day. That was largely through the bright services of my new crew aboard the ‘Rocket.’ Accept this card, each of you, as a little indication of my appreciation.”

The “card” that was held out to each was a twenty-dollar bill. Halstead glanced at it hesitatingly, while his two comrades looked at him.

“Don’t be backward,” urged Mr. Delavan, good-humoredly. “This sort of thing doesn’t happen every day. You’ve really earned it to-day, and my luncheon will set better if you take the money.”

“Thank you,” said Tom, in a low voice. “But we’re under regular salaries to serve your interests, Mr. Delavan.”

It was a little whiff from the gale of fortune that the two Wall Street men believed had blown their way this day.

CHAPTER III

THE BUYER OF SOULS

WHEN the "Rocket" was tied up at her pier at East Hampton, at a little before four o'clock that afternoon, and while Tom and Jed were still busy at the hawsers, the owner and his guest slipped away.

"No orders for the rest of the day, or to-morrow," remarked Halstead, as soon as he realized the fact. "Oh, well, the orders will probably come down later on. We've enough to keep us busy for a while, anyway."

There is, in fact, always enough to be done aboard a good-sized motor cruiser when the crew have her in at her berth. There is the engine to be gone over, deck and steering tackle to be inspected and perhaps repaired, the searchlight and signal lanterns to be taken care of, and a hundred other routine duties. The steward has his hands full of "housekeeping" affairs.

"I don't see that speed boat in anywhere," commented Jed, looking over the harbor.

"She must put up at some other point of the Bay," Tom replied. "Well, the game of her people was beaten to-day, so I don't suppose we shall have to feel any more concern about the speed boat."

Never did Tom Halstead make a more erroneous guess. That same speed boat, as subsequent events will show, was destined to become intensely involved in the affairs of all aboard the "Rocket."

At five o'clock Jed began to busy himself, in the galley forward, with the preparation of such a meal as young appetites, sharpened by the sea air, demanded. An hour later that meal was ready, and eaten to the last morsel.

Darkness found Tom and Joe pacing the pier together, while Jed reclined lazily in one of the wicker deck chairs on the deck aft.

"I really wish Mr. Delavan had given us some hint of to-morrow's orders," muttered Halstead.

"If he wanted to sail early to-morrow I believe he'd have said so," replied Joe.

"That might be true enough for most days," argued Halstead. "But think what an unusual day this has been for him. His mind is on the biggest game of a money king's year."

"He seemed to take it easily enough," rejoined Dawson.

"Why, that's his business mask, Joe. Our new owner is a man who has made himself successful by not allowing himself to get so rattled that he gets everyone around him on pin-points. He felt the excitement of the day's work well and plenty. Don't have any hazy ideas about that."

"But what a fearfully nervous chap little Mr. Moddridge is," observed Dawson. "It really makes one begin to stutter, just to look at him when he's worried."

"Joe," announced the young skipper, after a look at his watch, "if you and Jed will stay with the boat I'm going to run up to the hotel, just to see if there's any definite word for us."

"Don't take the word from Moddridge, then," laughed Dawson.

The young skipper didn't hurry; there was no need of that, and the night, away from the water front, was warm and close. East Hampton is a busy summer resort, and the streets were thronged with girls in summer white and holiday mood, a sprinkling of young men, a good many children and some older people. Not a few turned to gaze after the erect young sailor, in his natty uniform, as Halstead strolled along taking in the sights. Tom knew where the Eagle House was, for that was where he and his mates had first reported to the "Rocket's" owner. In a few minutes he stepped into the lobby of that handsome summer hostelry.

"Is Mr. Delavan in?" he asked of a clerk at the office desk.

"Mr. Delavan left about half an hour ago," was the answer. "He and his friend went away in an auto, but I think they went only for a short spin to get the air. If you wish to wait, captain, make yourself at home here."

"Thank you," nodded Tom, courteously. "I believe I will wait."

Passing out onto the porch the young skipper seated himself near the railing. Wind, fog and sunshine had all left their impress of drowsiness on Halstead. Before long he sat with half-closed eyes, thinking slowly of the events of the day, and wondering not a little what unusual business it could be that Messrs. Delavan and Moddridge were pursuing. Back of the young captain men and women were strolling up and down the veranda in little groups, laughing and chatting.

Half sleepily Tom felt a paper touch against his hand. More or less instinctively his fingers closed upon it. Then, with something of a start he sat more upright, bringing that hand from his side to his lap.

It was a single, small sheet, folded once. Opening it, Captain Tom read these typewritten words:

As a most important matter of business take a walk at once, out over the Bridge Road. Continue walking, perhaps for a quarter of a mile, until you are accosted. Remember that Fortune rarely knocks at any man's door. This is your opportunity to line your pockets with greenbacks of large denominations. Come and meet one who truly enjoys seeing a young man prosper, and who will take pleasure in showing you how you may soon have a fine bank account. But come at once, as your well-wisher's time is very limited.

"Arabian Nights! Fairy tales!" smiled Captain Tom Halstead, showing his teeth. "Who is putting this up on me, and what is the joke, I wonder?"

He was about to toss away the piece of paper, after tearing it up, when a new thought stayed him.

"There may be something real in this," thought the boy. "Mr. Delavan and his friend certainly appeared a bit worried over that racing craft. If there's anything behind this note Mr. Delavan will want to know what it's about, and so shall I."

Young Captain Halstead was already on his feet, his shrewd, keen eyes looking over the veranda crowd. Yet he saw no one upon whom he could settle as a likely suspect. He could only conclude that whoever had casually slipped the paper into his hand had already purposely disappeared.

"I believe I'll accept this invitation to take a walk," mused the young skipper. "If there's anything real behind the note I may as well find out what it is. If there's nothing but a hoax in it I'll be willing to admit that I snapped at it."

There was plenty of time to take the walk and be back before Mr. Delavan's return was looked for. Asking one of the hotel employes where to find the Bridge Road, young Captain Halstead set out briskly. Nor did he have to go far before he came to the bridge that gave the road its name. A little way past the bridge in question the road became more lonely. Then Halstead came to the edge of a forest, though a thin one of rather recent growth.

"I'll walk on for five minutes, anyway," decided Captain Tom. "After that, if nothing happens, it'll be time to think of turning back."

"Hist!" That sound came so sharply out of the dark depths that the boy started, then halted abruptly.

"Halstead! Captain Halstead!" hailed a voice.

"Where are you?" Tom asked, in a louder tone than that which greeted him.

"You're Captain Halstead, are you?" insisted a voice, not much above a whisper, which the young skipper now located in a clump of bushes between two tall spruce trees.

"Yes; I'm Halstead. Who wants me?"

"Step in this way, please."

So Tom stepped unhesitatingly from the road, and walked toward the voice, at the same time demanding:

"Are you the one who handed me a note?"

"Yes, but not quite so loudly, please."

"Why not?" challenged Halstead, simply.

"Well, because our business is to be – er – well, confidential."

Tom Halstead found himself standing before a tall, slim, well-dressed young man. More than that he could not see in the partial darkness, so the young skipper struck a match and held it up.

“Here,” exclaimed the stranger, hastily, “what are you doing?”

“Trying to get a better idea of you, and whether you are in the least ashamed of your business with me,” Tom replied, quietly.

The stranger, who proved to be red-haired, stood more quietly, gazing intently at this composed young motor boat boy.

“Well,” inquired the stranger, at last, and speaking more pleasantly, “are you satisfied with my appearance?”

“I’ll admit being curious to know what your business with me can be,” Halstead replied.

“You read my note through?”

“Yes, of course. But that did not tell me your business, or your name,” Tom answered.

“Oh, I can tell you all about my business with you, in a few minutes,” the other assured the young skipper.

“And your name, too?”

“Why are you so particular about my name?”

“Why, you see,” smiled Captain Tom, “down in our little country town, the place where I was raised, we always rather wondered at any man who seemed ashamed or reluctant to give his name.”

“Oh, I see,” laughed the other. “And, on the whole, captain, I think your point is rather well taken. So, to begin with, my name is Calvin Rexford. Now, as to my business, you are willing to make a little money now, and a great deal more later on, are you not?”

“How much money?” asked Tom Halstead, bluntly.

“Can you guess how much there is here?” inquired Rexford. He took from one of his pockets and held out a small, compact roll of bills. Tom coolly struck another match, scanning the roll, and discovering that there was a twenty-dollar bill on the outside of it.

“There’s five hundred in this little pile,” observed Mr. Rexford. “Half a thousand dollars. That’s just the starter, you understand. If you obey certain orders you’ll get another little lump of money like this. In the end there’ll be a sum big enough for you to live on the rest of your days. Like the sound of it? And this half thousand goes to you at once, in return for a promise or two. *Now*, can we undertake business together?”

Though Captain Tom Halstead’s eyes had momentarily glistened at the tempting sight of so much money, he now asked, composedly:

“What’s the business?”

“You’re skipper of Francis Delavan’s ‘Rocket,’ aren’t you?”

“Yes.”

“You expect to continue to hold the position?”

“Probably all through this summer.”

“Then see here, Captain Halstead, all you have to do is to follow certain orders. One of them, for instance, is, whenever you see another craft near that hoists a red pennant, crossed diagonally by a single white stripe, you’re to have something happen to your boat so that you can’t proceed for some time. You can *make believe* something happens to the boat, you know.”

“You’ve got hold of the wrong party, my friend,” answered the young skipper, as quietly as ever. “The fellow you want is my chum, Joe Dawson, the ‘Rocket’s’ engineer.”

Rexford looked Tom Halstead over as keenly as was possible in the darkness.

“Do you mean, captain,” he demanded, finally, “that we’ll have to let your friend in on this?”

“Of course,” Tom nodded, “if there’s really anything to be done along the lines you’re describing.”

“What kind of a fellow is this Joe Dawson?”

“Well,” replied Tom, reflectively, “Joe’s hot tempered once in a while. If you proposed anything to him that he considered crooked, he’d most likely hit you over the head with a wrench.”

“So you call my offer a crooked one, do you?” insisted Rexford, a curious note in his voice.

“You’re proposing to buy us out – to pay us to sell out our employer, aren’t you?” asked Halstead, directly.

“Why, I am trying to show you how you can make a very handsome sum of money by being accommodating,” said the young man, slowly.

“You’re asking us to sell out our employer and our own sense of honor, aren’t you?” persisted the young motor boat captain.

“Look here, Halstead, you don’t want to be foolish,” remonstrated the red-haired one. “I’m willing enough to let your friend into this matter, and I’ll make it highly profitable for you both. But don’t get too stiff about it. I’m only making a very handsome offer to buy some of your interest and time.”

“Oh,” smiled Halstead, quizzically. “Pardon me. I thought you were trying to buy my soul.”

The irony, however, was wasted on the other. “Well, now you understand that I’m not,” laughed Rexford, easily. “So we can begin to talk real business. Let us begin by dropping this money into your pocket.”

He attempted to slip the roll of banknotes into one of the boy’s coat pockets, but Halstead quickly side-stepped, receiving the proffered money in his right hand.

“Oh, very well,” laughed Rexford, “do just as you please with the money. It’s yours, you know.”

“Thank you,” acknowledged the young skipper. Then, before Rexford could even guess what he meant to do, Tom Halstead swung back his right arm, bringing his hand up over his shoulder.

“Here, stop that!” quivered Rexford, darting forward and clutching the young skipper’s arm. But the move was too late, for Captain Tom had already hurled the compact little mass of banknotes as far as he could through the forest. On account of Rexford’s sudden movement neither of them heard the money drop to earth.

“What do you mean by that?” demanded the red-haired one, hoarsely, his breath coming fast, his eyes gleaming angrily.

“You told me to do as I pleased with the money,” retorted Tom. “So I got it out of my hands as quickly as possible. I don’t like that kind of money.”

“Do you mean to say that you throw our business over?” cried Rexford.

“Of course I do,” smiled Tom. “Are you so slow-witted that it cost you all that money to find it out?”

“Confound you, I’ve a good mind to give you a good beating,” came tempestuously from the other’s lips.

“Try it,” again smiled Halstead, undauntedly.

“Then we can’t get you on our side?” demanded Rexford, his tone suddenly changing to one of imploring. Still smiling, Captain Tom shook his head. There was a quick step in the bushes behind him, and a sturdy pair of arms wound themselves about the young skipper, while Rexford leaped at him from in front.

“If we can’t count on Halstead,” declared a new voice, from the rear, “then we can’t let him get away from us, either – not when there are millions at stake!”

CHAPTER IV

TOM HALSTEAD'S FIGHT AGAINST ODDS

TOM'S sea-trained muscles could always be relied upon to stand him in good stead at need. He strove, now, like a young panther, to free himself. But this was a battle of one boy against two men, and one of the latter had the boy's arms wrapped close to his body in a tight embrace.

There was a short, panting struggle, after which the young skipper was bent over. He lurched to the earth, face downward, while his yet unseen assailant fell heavily upon him.

"Fight fair, can't you?" growled the captain of the "Rocket."

"This isn't a fight," retorted the voice of the newcomer. "It's a matter of self-preservation. Lie still, can't you. I don't want to have to club you out of your senses. It isn't a gentleman's kind of work."

"You're right it isn't," gritted Halstead, though he now lay more quietly, for the auburn-haired Rexford had thrown himself, also, upon him. "There isn't anything about this business that smacks of the gentleman," the boy added, tauntingly.

"Hold your tongue, will you?" demanded the unknown one, angrily.

"When it pleases me most," growled Captain Tom, fast getting into an ugly, reckless mood.

"Rexford, I can hold him," went on the man. "Station yourself by the youngster's head. Go as far as you like, if he tries to make any noise. Now, young man, I think you would better listen, while I do the talking. We're sorry enough to treat you in this fashion, but it's all your own fault."

"How is that?" challenged the youthful skipper.

"We gave you a fine chance to make your fortune. You wouldn't have it. Now, if we let you go, you'd spoil all our plans by repeating what has happened to your employer."

"Right!" snapped Captain Tom. "That's just what I'm going to do."

"Just what you're *not* going to do," retorted the man. "It'll be many a day before you'll see anyone we don't want you to see."

"What are you talking about?" demanded Halstead, gruffly.

"You'll find out. Rexford, get out some cord, and we'll tie this young Indian up. If he tries to yell, hit him as hard as you like, and after that we'll gag him. Remember, Halstead, you've got to keep quiet and go with us. If you behave quietly you won't be hurt at all. You'll only be held for safe keeping for a few weeks. Then you'll be turned loose, with a little purse to console you for your present loss of liberty."

That didn't sound very dangerous, but the young motor boat skipper was not one who would tamely submit to any such proposition. Yet he said nothing as the unknown man rose from his back, to kneel beside him while Rexford tied his hands.

Just as that shifting was accomplished, however, Tom Halstead rolled swiftly over on his back. With a cry of anger the man made a swift movement to bend over the lad. It was an unfortunate move. One of Halstead's flying feet caught him squarely in the face. Another kick was aimed at Rexford, who sprang back out of the danger zone.

"Now I don't care what you do to the boy!" snarled the unknown, after venting a groan of pain and raising his hands to his face, which, however, had not been struck hard enough to mark it. "Sail in, Rexford, and help me teach the young idiot a lesson."

But Captain Tom had made brisk use of that moment of freedom. As his heels struck the earth again he threw his arms and body forward, leaping to his feet. In the instant he started running.

"Here, you can't get away – don't attempt it!" growled the unknown, bolting after the boy.

Rexford, being at one side, ran so as to head off the young skipper ere he could reach the road. And Rexford at once showed signs of being a sprinter.

If either of the pair caught hold of him Tom Halstead knew that capture would be swift enough. Well ahead of the unknown, Halstead veered enough to give him another momentary start on Rexford.

Tom darted to a young oak tree, one of whose branches hung low. This gave an opportunity not to be overlooked at such a moment. Leaping at the branch, grappling with it with both hands, Halstead drew himself up with a sailor's speed and surety. From that he stepped like a flash to the next higher branch. Now, he grinned down at his enemies.

Rexford and the unknown collided with each other just beside the trunk of that tree.

"I hope you won't either of you try to follow me up here," hinted Captain Tom, mockingly. "If you do, I shall have to kick one of you in the face."

Holding on above him, he swung one foot suggestively. It was not too dark for the pair below to realize how much bodily risk there would be in attacking this gritty youngster in his present place of advantage.

"You're all right up there," admitted Rexford, coldly. "We can't come up after you without getting damaged heads. But, my boy, what is to hinder us from throwing enough stones up there to make it pretty warm for you?"

Tom's grin of confidence suddenly vanished. He had overlooked the possibility of being dislodged by a volley or two of stones. Had the field been clear for a six-foot start from his tormentors he would have felt like taking the chance of leaping down and taking to his heels once more. But they were right at hand, below. The boy felt himself trapped.

"Don't let him get away," advised Rexford. "I'm going into the road after a few stones."

The unknown got even closer to the base of the tree. Rexford, after a careful look at the relative positions of trapper and trapped, ran out to the road.

"Who are we? Who are we? C-o-l-b-y! Rah! rah! rah!"

Down the road came volleys of ringing yells, as though from the throats of a lot of happy savages.

"Rah! rah! rah!"

"College boys, or a lot of young fellows masquerading as such!" flashed jubilantly through Tom Halstead's brain.

"Rah! rah! rah! Wow! Right here! Trouble! Hustle!" roared Tom, as huskily as his lung power permitted.

"Stop that, you infernal imp!" snarled Rexford, leaping back from the road.

"Colby! Here on the run! Trouble!" roared Halstead at the top of his voice.

"What's that? Who's there?" came a hail from up the road.

Whizz-zz! Thump! A stone, guided by Rexford's hand, came through the air, glancing from one of Halstead's shins.

"Hustle here quick! Follow the voice!" roared Tom.

He ducked his head just in time to avoid a stone propelled at his face by Rexford.

"Rah! rah! Hold on! We're coming. Trouble, you say? Colby to the mix-up and the happy ending!"

"Come, Rexford! We've got to sprint," advised the unknown.

Up the road the sound of charging feet came nearer. Rexford and his companion sprang into the woods, running as fast as they could go. But Halstead wisely concluded to remain treed until he beheld more than a dozen athletic looking young men under the tree. Then he slid to the ground.

"Did you call 'trouble'?" demanded one of the newcomers.

"I did," the young skipper admitted.

"Then hand over the goods! Show us the face of trouble, or take your punishment as a raiser of false hopes!" insisted the leader of the boys.

"And be quick about it. We haven't seen any trouble in an hour," proclaimed another of the boisterous crowd.

“Come into these woods with me,” begged Halstead. “Scatter and sprint. There are two men trying to get away – the rascals! If you can find them for me I’ll try to have them held by the police for assault.”

“What do they look like?”

Halstead gave a quick description of Rexford. Of the unknown one the young skipper could say only that he was a dark-haired man of thirty, clad in a gray suit.

The spirit of adventure being upon these young fellows, they scattered, dashing through the woods on a chance of finding anything that might look like a scrimmage. Five minutes of strenuous chasing, however, failed to discover Rexford or his companion, who must have known these woods well. Then the rah-rah boys, hot and disgusted, came back to the road.

“See here, young man,” remarked one of their leaders, severely, “you haven’t been trifling with our young hopes, have you?”

“On my word of honor, no,” Tom replied, earnestly. Then a happy, somewhat vengeful thought struck him.

“See here, fellows,” he went on, “I know pretty near the spot where a roll of five hundred dollars lies in the woods yonder. If you can find it I guess it will be yours, for frolic or dividing, just as you like.”

But that proved an almost dangerous piece of information to offer.

“Five hundred – what?” scowled the leader of the young men.

“We’ve found a crazy boy!” roared another.

“To the asylum with him!”

“No! Drag him along and duck him – that will be enough!”

Whooping, these irresponsible young fellows charged down upon Halstead. But he knew better than to run. Laughing, he stood his ground.

“Oh, well, if you won’t believe me,” he said, with mock resignation, “let it go at that. But what are you going to do?”

“Listen, child!” roared the leader of the crowd. “We are pushing forward for the surprise and capture of East Hampton. Willst go with us, and witness scenes of military glory?”

“I’m gladly with you for going to town,” replied the young skipper.

“Then come along. Preserve the utmost silence and stealth, all ye, my brave men,” ordered the leader, leaping out into the road.

“Rah, rah, rah!” they answered him, roaringly, and turned their faces townward. Tom glad to get out of it all so easily, stepped along with them.

“What was that about trouble, younker?” one of the supposed college boys asked Halstead. “Did you think you saw a shadow among the trees?”

“It was a good deal more than a shadow,” insisted Halstead. “I was attacked by two men.”

Tom’s questioner looked at him searchingly, then replied good-humoredly:

“Oh, well, say no more about it, and I guess the fellows will forget. It gave us a good excuse for a sprint, anyway.”

To Halstead it looked as though these college boys suspected him of some hoax, but were good-naturedly willing to overlook the joke on them. The young skipper was willing to accept the protection of their boisterous, husky companionship on any terms until safely out of the woods and over the bridge once more. As he found himself entering the town again Tom slipped away, unobserved, from the noisy dozen or more. Two or three minutes later he was back at the hotel.

Inquiry showed that Messrs. Delavan and Moddridge had not yet returned. Captain Tom again sought a veranda chair, and, sitting down, awaited their coming.

CHAPTER V

MR. MODDRIDGE'S NERVES CUT LOOSE

UP in Mr. Delavan's suite of rooms Eben Moddridge paced the floor in great excitement. For Captain Tom Halstead had just finished his story of the night's queer happening.

Francis Delavan, on the other hand, drew slowly, easily, at his cigar, his outward composure not in the least ruffled.

Yet, at the outset, Moddridge had been the one to doubt the young motor boat skipper's strange yarn. Delavan, on the other hand, had believed it implicitly. At the end the nervous smaller man was also a believer.

"Frank," declared Eben Moddridge, "this is a simply atrocious state of affairs. There is a plot against us, and a desperate, well-organized one."

"Let them plot, then," smiled Delavan. "It's all right, since we are warned. Yet, Halstead, I'm just a bit disappointed that you didn't pretend to fall in with the schemes of your strangers. You would have learned more of what is planned against us."

"I don't believe they intended to tell me anything definite, sir," Captain Tom answered, slowly. "They spoke of a signal, on seeing which I was to pretend that the 'Rocket' was disabled and unable to proceed. I have an idea, Mr. Delavan, that all their other instructions would have been as vague, as far as real information is concerned."

"I dare say you are right, my boy," nodded the "Rocket's" owner. "You did best, after all, no doubt. I must confess myself puzzled, though. Your descriptions of the two men don't fit any possible enemies that I can call to mind."

"They were most likely agents, acting for someone else, don't you think, Mr. Delavan?"

"Undoubtedly, captain."

"Frank," broke in Eben Moddridge, in a shaking voice, as he halted, looking the picture of nervous breakdown, "you must engage detectives instantly."

"Nonsense, Eben," retorted his friend.

"Or at least, two or three strong, daring men who will remain with you, to defend you against any possible attack."

Mr. Delavan laughed heartily.

"Eben," he demanded, "what on earth ails you?"

"Oh, I am so nervous!" moaned the other. "I see dangers, horrors, ahead of us!"

Francis Delavan grinned. Then, noting the ashen-gray look on his friend's face, he stepped over, walking with the nervous one and laying a kindly hand on the other's shoulder.

"Eben, you always let yourself get unduly excited. What you need, just now, is a good, sound night's sleep."

"Sleep?" shuddered the nervous one. "I couldn't think of it. My nerves –"

"You've let them cut loose again, Eben, and make life a burden to you. There's no need of it."

"But you know, Frank, the big money deals we're engaged in. You know well that some men would give their souls to possess our information, both that which we have and expect to get."

"True, perhaps," admitted Mr. Delavan, nodding. "But the only way they have tried to reach us is through the bribing of our young captain. Halstead and his friends can't be bribed, so the rascals can't hope to do anything. I have full faith in our crew."

"Something terrible is almost certain to happen, just the same," insisted Mr. Moddridge, his voice quaking.

"Oh, nonsense, man! Go to sleep. Your nerves need rest."

“Laugh at me,” muttered Moddridge, his face now showing a sickly smile. “But the day will come soon, Frank, when you will wish you had listened to me.”

“But haven’t I listened to you?” inquired Mr. Delavan, with a mock-injured air. “Eben, are you going to be disappointed because I won’t let my nerves rule me, too?”

“I wish your nerves did get the upper hand once in a while,” groaned the smaller man. “Then you’d know what I feel. I tell you, Frank, the immediate future looks dark – dark!”

Mr. Delavan laughed jovially.

“Something fearfully unfortunate is going to happen,” insisted the man of nerves.

“Something very unfortunate,” assented Delavan. “We’re going to add something in the way of millions to our fortunes, and those millions will have to be looked after. Eben, a rich man’s lot isn’t a happy one, is it?”

“Happy?” groaned Moddridge. “I should say not.”

“Then I’ll tell you what to do,” proposed Mr. Delavan. “Turn your miserable fortune over to Halstead, and then sit by to watch him going to pieces with worry.”

Mr. Moddridge, however, refused to be comforted, or to take a humorous view of anything.

“Halstead,” said Mr. Delavan, going over and resting a hand on the young captain’s shoulder, “I don’t expect to need the ‘Rocket’ for any purpose to-morrow, but I can’t tell definitely yet. Go back on board. To-morrow keep all hands on board or close by, so that you can take the boat out if needed. Enjoy yourselves all you can. Eat the best that you can find aboard. Don’t bother about to-night’s happenings – my friend, Moddridge, will attend to all of that. If it happens that you, or Dawson, are approached again by strangers, let them think that you might be induced to fall in with their plans, after all, and then you can let me know what follows. Moddridge and I are playing a peculiar and big game with the money market, and I’ve no doubt that others would like to steal or bribe their way into it. But I trust you. Good night, my boy.”

So Captain Tom strolled back to the pier, thinking over a good many things. As he came in sight of the “Rocket” at her berth he noted that the only lights showing were one deck light, aft, and the gleam that came through the port-holes of the crew’s quarters forward. It looked as though Joe Dawson and Jed Prentiss had turned in for the night, or were about to do so.

One of the small Shinnecock Bay freight boats lay in at the other side of the same pier. A good many cases and barrels were piled up, as though awaiting shipment. Captain Tom stepped over to his own side of the pier, still thinking intently.

Just as the young skipper turned toward the “Rocket’s” gang-plank a heavy object came up over one of the freight piles, flying through the air. Some instinct of danger made young Halstead leap aside. Bump! An iron hitching weight struck the gang-plank with a bang.

For just an instant Captain Tom stood gazing at that heavy missile almost in a daze.

“That was aimed at my legs. The intention must have been to cripple me!” leaped to his lips.

Then, in a lustier voice, he roared:

“Joe! Jed! Tumble out on deck! lively, now!”

CHAPTER VI

THE SIGN OF MISCHIEF

THE next instant after that rousing hail there was a sound of scrambling below. Halstead did not wait. Turning, he raced around the end of that pile of freight. He was in time to hear a loud splash in the water astern of the little freight steamer, though not in time to see who or what jumped. Then he heard Joe and Jed on the “Rocket’s” deck.

“Over here, fellows!” he called. “And come quickly!” Then as his two friends, partly disrobed, rushed to his side, Captain Tom pointed to the water.

“Someone threw a weight at me,” he explained. “He jumped in. Watch to see him rise. Jed, you watch from the other side of the pier. Joe, take the end – and hustle!”

Thus distributed, the crew of the “Rocket” watched and listened for the rising of Tom Halstead’s recent assailant. Time went by, however, until it was certain that no human being could any longer remain under water. Yet no head showed, nor was any being heard making the shore. Then the two other boys came back to their young leader, who was looking extremely thoughtful.

“I wonder,” mused Tom, aloud, “whether I’ve had a good one played on me? You see that weight resting yonder on our gang-plank. That was thrown at me from behind this pile of freight. After yelling for you fellows, I rushed over here just in time to hear a splash. And now it has struck me that some mighty smooth chap may have pitched another weight into the water, then doubled around the freight and so got ashore and away.”

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