

Duffield J. W.

# Bert Wilson, Wireless Operator



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# **J. W. Duffield**

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### **CHAPTER I**

#### **Running Amuck**

“Amuck! Amuck! He’s running amuck! Quick! For your lives!”

The drowsy water front pulsed into sudden life. There was a sound of running feet, of hoarse yells, a shriek of pain and terror as a knife bit into flesh, and a lithe, brown figure leaped upon the steamer’s rail.

It was a frightful picture he presented, as he stood there, holding to a stanchion with one hand, while, in the other, he held a crooked dagger whose point was stained an ominous red. He was small and wiry, only a little over five feet in height, but strong and quick as a panther. His black hair, glossy with cocoa oil, streamed in the wind, his eyes were lurid with the wild light of insanity, his lips were parted in a savage snarl, and he was foaming at the mouth. He had lost all semblance of humanity, and as he stood there looking for another victim, he might have been transported bodily from one of Doré’s pictures of Dante’s Inferno. Suddenly, he caught sight of a group of three coming down the pier, and leaping to the wharf, he started toward them, his bare feet padding along noiselessly, while he tightened his grip on the murderous knife. A shot rang out behind him but missed him, and he kept on steadily, drawing nearer and nearer to his intended prey.

The three companions, toward whom doom was coming so swiftly and fearfully, were now halfway down the pier. They were typical young Americans, tall, clean cut, well knit, and with that easy swing and carriage that marks the athlete and bespeaks splendid physical condition. They had been laughing and jesting and were evidently on excellent terms with life. Their eyes were bright, their faces tinged with the bronzed red of perfect health, the blood ran warmly through their veins, and it seemed a bitter jest of fate that over them, of all men, should be flung the sinister shadow of death. Yet never in all their life had they been so near to it as on that sleepy summer afternoon on that San Francisco wharf.

At the sound of the shot they looked up curiously. And then they saw.

By this time the Malay was not more than fifty feet away. He was running as a mad dog runs, his head shaking from side to side, his kriss brandished aloft, his burning eyes fixed on the central figure of the three. He expected to die, was eager to die, but first he wanted to kill. The dreadful madness peculiar to the Malay race had come upon him, and the savage instincts that slumbered in him were now at flood. He had made all his preparations for death, had prayed to his deities, blackened his teeth as a sign of his intention, and devoted himself to the infernal gods. Then by the use of maddening drugs he had worked himself into a state of wild delirium and started forth to slay. They had sought to stop him as he rushed out from the cook’s galley, but he had slashed wildly right and left and one of them had been left dangerously wounded on the steamer’s deck. The captain and mates had rushed to their cabins to get their revolvers, and it was the shot from one of these that had tried vainly to halt him in his death dealing course. The crew, unarmed, had sought refuge where they could, and now, with his thirst for blood still unslaked, he rushed toward the unsuspecting strangers.

For one awful instant their hearts stood still as they caught sight of the fiendish figure bearing down upon them. None of them had a weapon. They had never dreamed of needing one. Their stout hearts and, at need, their fists, had always proved sufficient, and they shared the healthy American repugnance at relying on anything else than nature had given them. There was no way to evade the issue. Had they turned, the madman, with the impetus he already had, would have been upon them

before they could get under way. There was no alternative. They *must* play with that grim gambler, Death, with their lives as the stakes. And at the thought, they stiffened.

The Malay was within ten feet. Quick as a flash, the taller of the three dove straight for the madman's legs. The latter made a wicked slash downward, but his arm was caught in a grip of iron, and the next instant the would-be murderer was thrown headlong to the pier, his knife clattering harmlessly to one side. The three were on him at once, and, though he fought like a wildcat, they held him until the crowd, bold now that the danger was past, swarmed down on the wharf and trussed him securely with ropes. Then the trio rose, shook themselves and looked at each other.

"By Jove, Bert," said the one who had grasped the Malay's arm as it was upraised to strike, "that was the dandiest tackle I ever saw, and I've seen you make a good many. If you'd done that in a football game on Thanksgiving day, they'd talk of it from one end of the country to the other."

"O, I don't know, Dick," responded Bert. "Perhaps it wasn't so bad, but then, you know, I never had so much at stake before. Even at that I guess it would have been all up with me, if you hadn't grabbed that fellow's hand just at the minute you did."

"If I hadn't, Tom would," rejoined Dick lightly. "He went for it at the same instant, but I was on the side of the knife hand and so got there first. But it was a fearfully close shave," he went on soberly, "and I for one have had enough of crazy Malays to last me a lifetime."

"Amen to that," chimed in Tom, fervently, "a little of that sort of thing goes a great way. If this is a sample of what we're going to meet, there won't be much monotony on this trip."

"Well, no," laughed Bert, "not so that you could notice it. Still, when you tackle the Pacific Ocean, you're going to find it a different proposition from sailing on a mill pond, and I shouldn't be surprised if we found action enough to keep our joints from getting rusty before we get back."

The crowd that had seemed to come from everywhere were loud in their commendation of the boys' courage and presence of mind. Soon, an ambulance that had been hastily summoned rattled up to the pier, at top speed, and took charge of the wounded sailor, while a patrol wagon carried the maniac to the city prison. The throng melted away as rapidly as it had gathered, and the three chums mounted the gangway of the steamer. A tall, broad shouldered man in a captain's uniform advanced to greet them.

"That was one of the pluckiest things I ever saw," he said warmly, as he grasped their hands. "You were lucky to come out of that scrape alive. Those Malays are holy terrors when they once get started. I've seen them running amuck in Singapore and Penang before now, but never yet on this side of the big pond. That fellow has been sullen and moody for days, but I've been so busy getting ready to sail that I didn't give it a second thought. I had a bead drawn on the beggar when he was making toward you, but didn't dare to fire for fear of hitting one of you. But all's well that ends well, and I'm glad you came through it without a scratch. You were coming toward the ship," he went on, as he looked at them inquiringly, "and I take it that your business was with me."

"Yes, sir," answered Bert, acting as spokesman. "My name is Wilson, and these are my two friends, Mr. Trent and Mr. Henderson."

"Wilson," repeated the captain in pleased surprise. "Why, not the wireless operator that the company told me they had engaged to make this trip?"

"The same," replied Bert, smiling.

"Well, well," said the captain, "I'm doubly glad to meet you, although I had no idea that our first meeting would take place under such exciting circumstances. You can't complain that we didn't give you a warm reception," he laughed. "Come along, and I'll show you your quarters and introduce you to the other officers."

Had any one told Bert Wilson, a month earlier, that on this June day he would be the wireless operator of the good ship "*Fearless*," Abel Manning, Captain, engaged in the China trade, he would have regarded it as a joke or a dream. He had just finished his Freshman year in College. It had been a momentous year for him in more ways than one. He had won distinction in his studies – a matter

of some satisfaction to his teachers. But he had been still more prominent on the college diamond – a matter of more satisfaction to his fellow students. He had just emerged from a heart breaking contest, in which his masterly twirling had won the pennant for his Alma Mater, and incidentally placed him in the very front rank of college pitchers. His plans for the summer vacation were slowly taking shape, when, one day, he was summoned to the office of the Dean.

“Sit down, Wilson,” he said, as he looked up from some papers, “I’ll be at liberty in a moment.”

For a few minutes he wrote busily, and then whirled about in his office chair and faced Bert, pleasantly.

“What are your plans for the summer, Wilson?” he asked. “Have you anything definite as yet?”

“Not exactly, sir,” answered Bert. “I’ve had several invitations to spend part of the time with friends, but, as perhaps you know, I haven’t any too much money, and I want to earn some during the vacation, to help me cover my expenses for next year. I’ve written to my Congressman at Washington to try to get me work in one of the wireless stations on the coast, but there seems to be so much delay and red tape about it that I don’t know whether it will amount to anything. If that doesn’t develop, I’ll try something else.”

“Hum,” said the Dean, as he turned to his desk and took a letter from a pigeon hole. “Now I have here a line from Mr. Quinby, the manager of a big fleet of steamers plying between San Francisco and the chief ports of China. It seems that one of his vessels, the *Fearless*, needs a good wireless operator. The last one was careless and incompetent, and the line had to let him go. Mr. Quinby is an old grad of the college, and an intimate personal friend of mine. He knows the thoroughness of our scientific course” – here a note of pride crept into the Dean’s voice – “and he writes to know if I can recommend one of our boys for the place. The voyage will take between two and three months, so that you can be back by the time that college opens in the Fall. The pay is good and you will have a chance to see something of the world. How would you like the position?”

How would he like it? Bert’s head was in a whirl. He had always wanted to travel, but it had seemed like an “iridescent dream,” to be realized, if at all, in the far distant future. Now it was suddenly made a splendid possibility. China and the islands of the sea, the lands of fruits and flowers, of lotus and palm, of minarets and pagodas, of glorious dawns and glittering noons and spangled nights! The East rose before him, with its inscrutable wisdom, its passionless repose, its heavy-lidded calm. It lured him with its potency and mystery, its witchery and beauty. Would he go!

He roused himself with an effort and saw the Dean regarding him with a quizzical smile.

“Like it,” he said enthusiastically, “there’s nothing in all the world I should like so well. That is,” he added, “if you are sure I can do the work. You know of course that I’ve had no practical experience.”

“Yes,” said the Dean, “but I’ve already had a talk with your Professor of Applied Electricity, and he says that there isn’t a thing about wireless telegraphy that you don’t understand. He tells me that you are equally familiar with the Morse and the Continental codes, and that you are quicker to detect and remedy a defect than any boy in your class. From theory to practice will not be far, and he is confident that before your ship clears the Golden Gate you’ll know every secret of its wireless equipment from A to Z. I don’t mind telling you that your name was the first one that occurred to both him and myself, as soon as the matter was broached. Mr. Quinby has left the whole thing to me, so that, if you wish to go, we’ll consider the matter settled, and I’ll send him a wire at once.”

“I’ll go,” said Bert, “and glad of the chance. I can’t thank you enough for your kindness and confidence, but I’ll do my very best to deserve it.”

“I’m sure of that,” was the genial response, and, after a few more details of time and place had been settled, Bert took the extended hand of the Dean and left the office, feeling as though he were walking on air.

His first impulse was to hunt up his two chums, Tom and Dick, and tell them of his good fortune. Tom was a fellow classmate, while Dick had had one year more of college life. The bond that united

them was no common one, and had been cemented by a number of experiences shared together for several years back. More than once they had faced serious injury or possible death together, in their many scrapes and adventures, and the way they had backed each other up had convinced each that he had in the others comrades staunch and true. During the present year, they had all been members of the baseball team, Tom holding down third base in dashing style and Dick starring at first; and many a time the three had pulled games out of the fire and wrested victory from defeat. In work and fun they were inseparable; and straight to them now Bert went, flushed and elated with the good luck that had befallen him.

“Bully for you, old man,” shouted Dick, while Tom grabbed his hand and clapped him on the back; “It’s the finest thing that ever happened.”

“It sure is,” echoed Tom. “Just think of good old Bert among the Chinks. *And* the tea houses —*and* the tomtoms —*and* the bazaars —*and* the jinrikishas – and all the rest. By the time he gets back, he’ll have almond eyes and a pig-tail and be eating his rice with chop sticks.”

“Not quite as bad as that, I hope,” laughed Bert. “I’ve no ambition to be anything else than a good American, and probably all I’ll see abroad will only make me the more glad to see the Stars and Stripes again when I get back to ‘God’s country.’ But it surely will be some experience.”

Now that the first excitement was over, the conversation lagged a little, and a slight sense of constraint fell upon them. All were thinking of the same thing. Tom was the first to voice the common thought.

“Gee, Bert,” he said, “how I wish that Dick and I were coming along!”

“Why not?” asked Dick, calmly.

Bert and Tom looked at him in amazement.

“What!” yelled Bert. “You don’t really think there’s a chance?”

“A chance? Yes,” answered Dick. “Of course it’s nothing but a chance – as yet. The whole thing is so sudden and there are so many things to be taken into account that it can’t be doped out all at once. It may prove only a pipe dream after all. But Father promised me a trip abroad at the end of my course, if I got through all right, and, under the circumstances, he may be willing to anticipate a little. Then too, you know, he’s a red-hot baseball fan, and he’s tickled to death at the way we trimmed the other teams this year. And we all know that Tom’s folks have money to burn, and it ought to be no trick at all for him to get their consent. I tell you what, fellows, let’s get busy with the home people, right on the jump.”

And get busy they did, with the result that after a great deal of humming and hawing and backing and filling, the longed for consents were more or less reluctantly given. The boys’ delight knew no bounds, and it was a hilarious group that made things hum on the Overland Limited, as it climbed the Rockies and dropped down the western slope to the ocean. The world smiled upon them. Life ran riot within them. They had no inkling of how closely death would graze them before they even set foot upon their ship. Nor did they dream of the perils that awaited them, in days not far distant when that ship, passing through the Golden Gate, should turn its prow toward the East and breast the billows of the Pacific.

## CHAPTER II

### An Unexpected Meeting

The “Fearless” was a smart, staunch ship of about three thousand tons – one of a numerous fleet owned by the line of which Mr. Quinby was the manager. She had been built with special reference to the China trade, and was designed chiefly for cargoes, although she had accommodations for a considerable number of passengers. She was equipped with the latest type of modern screw engines, and although she did not run on a fixed schedule, could be counted on, almost as certainly as a regular liner, to make her port at the time appointed. Everything about the steamer was seamanlike and shipshape, and the boys were most favorably impressed, as, under the guidance of Captain Manning, they made their way forward. Here they were introduced to the first and second officers, and then shown to the quarters they were to occupy during the voyage.

Like everything else about the ship, these were trim and comfortable, and the boys were delighted to find that they had been assigned adjoining rooms. By the time they had washed and changed their clothes, it was time for supper, and to this they did ample justice. They were valiant trenchermen, and even the narrow escape of the afternoon had not robbed them of their appetites.

“You’d better eat while you can, fellows,” laughed Bert. “We sail to-morrow, and twenty-four hours from now, you may be thinking so little of food that you’ll be giving it all to the fishes.”

“Don’t you worry,” retorted Dick, “I’ve trolled for bluefish off the Long Island coast in half a gale, and never been seasick yet.”

“Yes,” said Bert, “but scudding along in a catboat is a different thing from rising and falling on the long ocean swells. We haven’t any swinging cabins here to keep things always level, and the ship isn’t long enough to cut through three waves at once like the big Atlantic liners.”

“Well,” said Tom, “if we do have to pay tribute to Neptune, I hope we won’t be so badly off as the poor fellow who, the first hour, was afraid he was going to die, and, the second hour, was afraid he couldn’t die.”

“Don’t fret about dying, boys,” put in the ship’s doctor, a jolly little man, with a paunch that denoted a love of good living; “You fellows are so lucky that they couldn’t kill you with an axe. Though that knife did come pretty near doing the trick, didn’t it? ‘The sweet little cherub that sits up aloft, looking after the life of poor Jack,’ was certainly working overtime, when that Malay went for you to-day.”

“Yes,” returned Dick, “but he slipped a cog in not looking after the poor fellow that brute wounded first. By the way, doctor, how is he? Will he live?”

“O, he’ll pull through all right,” answered the doctor. “I gave his wound the first rough dressing before the ambulance took him away. Luckily, the blade missed any of the vital organs, and a couple of months in the hospital will bring him around all right. That is, unless the knife was poisoned. These beggars sometimes do this, in order to make assurance doubly sure. I picked up the knife as it lay on the pier, and will turn it over to the authorities to-morrow. They’ll have to use it in evidence, when the case comes up for trial.”

He reached into his breast pocket as he spoke and brought out the murderous weapon. The boys shuddered as they looked at it and realized how near they had come to being its victims. They handled it gingerly as they passed it around, being very careful to avoid even a scratch, in view of what the doctor had said about the possibility of it being poisoned.

It was nearly a foot in length, with a massive handle that gave it a secure grip as well as additional force behind the stroke. The hilt was engraved with curious characters, probably an invocation to one of the malignant gods to whom it was consecrated. The blade was broad, with the edge of a razor and the point of a needle. But what gave it a peculiarly deadly and sinister significance was the

wavy, crooked lines followed by the steel, and which indicated the hideous wounds it was capable of inflicting.

“Nice little toy, isn’t it?” asked the doctor.

“It certainly is,” replied Bert. “A bowie knife is innocent, compared with this.”

“What on earth is it,” asked Dick, “that makes these fellows so crazy to kill those that have never done them an injury and that they have never even seen? I can understand how the desire for revenge may prompt a man to go to such lengths to get even with an enemy, but why they attack every one without distinction is beyond me.”

“Well,” replied the doctor, “it’s something with which reason has nothing to do. The Malays are a bloodthirsty, merciless race. They brood and sulk, until, like that old Roman emperor – Caligula, wasn’t it? – they wish that the human race had only one neck, so that they could sever it with a single blow. They are sick of life and determine to end it all, but before they go, all the pent up poison of hate that has been fermenting in them finds expression in the desire to take as many as possible with them. Then too, there may be some obscure religious idea underneath it all, of offering to the gods as many victims as possible, and thus winning favor for themselves. Or, like the savage despots of Africa, who decree that when they are buried hundreds of their subjects shall be slaughtered and buried in the same grave, they may feel that their victims will have to serve them in the future world. Scientists have never analyzed the matter satisfactorily.”

“Well,” said Dick, as they rose from the table, “one doesn’t have to be a scientist to know this much at least – that wherever a crazy Malay happens to be, it’s a mighty healthy thing to be somewhere else.”

“I guess nobody aboard this steamer would be inclined to dispute that,” laughed the doctor, as they separated and went on deck.

Although his duties did not begin until the following day, Bert was eager beyond anything else to inspect the wireless equipment of the ship, and went at once to the wireless room, followed by the others.

It was with immense satisfaction that he established that here he had under his hand the very latest in wireless telegraphy. From the spark key to the antennae, waving from the highest mast of the ship, everything was of the most approved and up to date type. No matter how skilful the workman, he is crippled by lack of proper tools; and Bert’s heart exulted as he realized that, in this respect, at least he had no reason for complaint.

“It’s a dandy plant, fellows,” he gloated. “There aren’t many Atlantic liners have anything on this.”

“How far can she talk, Bert?” asked Dick, examining the apparatus with the keenest interest.

“That depends on the weather, very largely,” answered Bert. “Under almost any conditions she’s good for five hundred miles, and when things are just right, two or three times as far.”

“What’s the limit, anyway, Bert?” asked Tom. “How far have they been able to send under the very best conditions?”

“I don’t believe there is any real limit,” answered Bert. “I haven’t any doubt that, before many years, they’ll be able to talk half way round the world. Puck, you know, in the ‘Midsummer Night’s Dream’ boasted that he would ‘put a girdle round the earth in forty minutes.’ Well, the wireless will go him one better, and go round in less than forty seconds. Why, only the other day at Washington, when the weather conditions were just right, the officials there heard two stations talking to each other, off the coast of Chili, six or seven thousand miles away. Of course, ships will never talk at that distance, because they can’t get a high enough mast or tower to overcome the curvature of the earth. But from land stations it is only a question of getting a high enough tower. They can talk easily now from Berlin to Sayville, Long Island, four thousand miles, by means of towers seven or eight hundred feet high. The Eiffel Tower at Paris, because still higher, has a longer range. It isn’t so very long ago that they were glad enough to talk across a little creek or canal, a few feet wide. Then they tried an

island, three or four miles away, then another, fourteen miles from the mainland. By the time they had done that, they knew that they had the right principle, and that it was only a matter of time before they'd bind the ends of the earth together. It started as a creeping infant; now, it's a giant, going round the world in its seven league boots."

"Hear hear," cried Dick, "how eloquent Bert is getting. He'll be dropping into poetry next."

"Well," chipped in Tom, "there *is* poetry sure enough in the crash of the spark and its leap out into the dark over the tumbling waves from one continent to another, but, to me, it's more like witchcraft. It's lucky Marconi didn't live two or three hundred years ago. He'd surely have been burned at the stake, for dabbling in black magic."

"Yes," rejoined Bert, "and Edison and Tesla would have kept him company. But now clear out, you fellows, and let me play with this toy of mine. I want to get next to all its quips and quirks and cranks and curves, and I can't do it with you dubs talking of poets and witches. Skip, now," and he laughingly shooed them on deck.

Left to himself, he went carefully over every detail of the equipment. Everything – detector, transmitter, tuning coil and all the other parts – were subjected to the most minute and critical inspection, and all stood the test royally. It was evident that no niggardly consideration of expense had prevented the installation of the latest and best materials. Bert's touch was almost caressing, as he handled the various parts, and his heart thrilled with a certain sense of ownership. There had been a wireless plant at one of the college buildings, and he had become very expert in its use; but hundreds of others had used it, too, and he was only one among many. Moreover, that plant had filled no part in the great world of commerce or of life, except for purposes of instruction. But this was the real thing, and from the time the steamer left the wharf until, on its return, it again swung into moorings, he would be in complete control. How many times along the invisible current would he feel the pulsing of the world's heart; what messages of joy or pain or peril would go from him or come to him, as he sat with his finger on the key and the receiver at his ear! He stood on the threshold of a new world, and it was a long time before he tore himself away, and went to rejoin his friends on the upper deck.

A young man, whose figure had something familiar about it was pacing to and fro. Bert cudged his memory. Of whom did it remind him? The young man turned and their eyes met. There was a start of recognition.

"Why, this must be Bert Wilson," said the newcomer, extending his hand.

"Yes," replied Bert, grasping it warmly, "and you are Ralph Quinby or his double."

"Quinby, sure enough," laughed Ralph, "and delighted to see you again. But what on earth brings you here, three thousand miles from home?"

"I expect to be twelve thousand miles from home before I get through," answered Bert; and then he told him of his engagement as wireless operator for the voyage.

"That's splendid," said Ralph, heartily. "We'll have no end of fun. I was just feeling a bit down in the mouth, because I didn't know a soul on board except the captain. You see, my father is manager of the line, and he wanted me to take the trip, so that I could enlarge my experience and be fit to step into his shoes when he gets ready to retire. So that, in a way, it's a pleasure and business trip combined."

"Here are some other fellows you know," remarked Bert, as he beckoned to Tom and Dick who came over from the rail.

They needed no introduction. A flood of memories swept over them as they shook hands. They saw again the automobile race, when Ralph in the "*Gray Ghost*" and Bert at the wheel of the "*Red Scout*" had struggled for the mastery. Before their eyes rose the crowded stands; they heard the deafening cheers and the roar of the exhausts; they saw again that last desperate spurt, when, with the throttle wide open, the "*Red Scout*" had challenged its gallant enemy in the stretch and flashed over the line, a winner.

That Ralph remembered it too was evident from the merry twinkle in his eyes, as he looked from one to the other of the group.

“You made me take your dust that day, all right,” he said, “but I’ve never felt sore over that for a minute. It was a fair and square race, and the best car and the best driver won.”

“Not on your life,” interjected Bert, warmly. “The best car, perhaps, but not the best driver. You got every ounce of speed out of your machine that anyone could, and after all it was only a matter of inches at the finish.”

“Well, it was dandy sport, anyway, win or lose,” returned Ralph. “By the way, I have the ‘Gray Ghost’ with me now. It’s crated up on the forward deck, and will be put down in the hold to-morrow. So come along now, and take a look at it.”

There, sure enough, was the long, powerful, gray car, looking “fit to run for a man’s life,” as Ralph declared, while he patted it affectionately.

“I thought I’d bring it along,” he said, “to use while we are in port at our various stopping places. It will take a good many days to unload, and then ship our return cargo, and, if the roads are good, we’ll show the natives some new wrinkles in the way of fancy driving. We’re all of us auto fiends, and I want you to feel that the car is as much yours as mine, all through the trip. That is,” he added, mischievously, “if you fellows don’t feel too haughty to ride in a car that you’ve already beaten.”

With jest and laughter, the time passed rapidly. The evening deepened, and a hush fell over the waters of the bay. Lanterns twinkled here and there like fireflies among the shipping, while from an occasional boat rose the tinkling of a banjo or guitar. From the shore side came the night sounds of the great city, sitting proudly on her many hills and crowned with innumerable lights. Silence gathered over the little group, as they gazed, and each was busy with his own thoughts. This loved land of theirs – by this time to-morrow, it would be out of sight below the horizon. Who knew when they would see it again, or through what perils they might pass before they once more touched its shores? It was the little shiver before the plunge, as they stood upon the brink of the unknown; and they were a trifle more quiet than usual, when at last they said good-night and sought forgetfulness in sleep.

## CHAPTER III

### A Startling Message

The next morning, all was stir and bustle on board the steamer. The great cranes groaned, as they hoisted aboard the last of the freight, and lowered it into the hold, that gaped like a huge monster, whose appetite could never be satiated. Men were running here and there, in obedience to the hoarse commands of the mates, and bringing order out of the apparent confusion. The pier and decks were thronged with friends and relatives of the passengers, come to say good-by to those who seemed to become doubly dear, as the hour of parting drew near. The cabins were piled with flowers that, under the inexorable rules of sea-going ships, would have to be thrown overboard, as soon as the vessel had cleared the harbor. Everywhere there were tears and smiles and hand grasps, as friends looked into each other's eyes, with the unspoken thought that the parting "might be for years, or it might be forever."

The boys had risen early, and, after a hearty breakfast, had come on deck, where they watched with keenest zest the preparations for the start. It was a glorious day and one that justified all they had heard of the wonderful California climate. The sun was bright, but not oppressive, and a delightful breeze blew up from the bay. The tang of the sea was in their nostrils, and, as they gazed over the splendid panorama spread out before them, their spirits rose and their hearts swelled with the mere joy of living. The slight melancholy of the night before had vanished utterly, and something of the old Viking spirit stirred within them, as they sniffed the salt breeze and looked toward the far horizon where the sky and waves came together. They, too, were Argonauts, and who knew what Golden Fleece of delight and adventure awaited their coming, in the enchanting empires of the East, or in the

"Summer isles of Eden, lying  
In dark purple spheres of sea."

As they stood at the rail, filling their lungs with the invigorating air, and watching the animated scenes about them, Ralph came up to them, accompanied by an alert, keen-eyed man, whom he introduced as his father.

He shook hands cordially with the boys, but when he learned that Dick and Tom, as well as Bert, were all students in the college from which he had himself graduated, his cordiality became enthusiasm. He was one of the men who, despite the passing of the years and the growth of business cares, remain young in heart, and he was soon laughing and chatting as gaily as the boys themselves. There was nothing of the snob about him, despite his wealth and prominence, and, in this respect Ralph was "a chip of the old block."

"So you are the Wilson whose fadeaway ball won the pennant, are you?" as he turned to Bert. "By George, I'd like to have seen that last game. The afternoon that game was played, I had the returns sent in over a special wire in my office. And when you forged ahead and then held down their heavy hitters in the ninth, I was so excited that I couldn't keep still, but just got up and paced the floor, until I guess my office force thought I was going crazy. But you turned the trick, all right, and saved my tottering reason," he added, jovially.

The boys laughed. "It's lucky I didn't know all that," grinned Bert, "or I might have got so nervous that they would have knocked me out of the box. But since you are so interested, let me show you a memento of the game." And running below, he was back in a minute with the souvenir presented to him by the college enthusiasts.

It was a splendid gift. The identical ball with which he had struck out the opposing team's most dangerous slugger in the ninth had been encased in a larger ball of solid gold on which Bert's name

had been engraved, together with the date and score of the famous game. Now it was passed from hand to hand amid loud expressions of admiration.

“It’s certainly a beauty,” commented Mr. Quinby, “and my only regret is that I wasn’t called upon to contribute toward getting it. I suppose it will be rather hard on you fellows,” he went on, “to have to go without any baseball this summer. If I know you rightly, you’d rather play than eat.”

“Oh, well,” broke in Ralph, “they may be able to take a fling at it once in a while, even if they are abroad. It used to be the ‘national’ game, but it is getting so popular everywhere that we’ll soon have to call it the ‘international’ game. In Japan, especially, there are some corking good teams, and they play the game for all it is worth. Take the nine of Waseda University, and they’d give Yale or Princeton all they wanted to do to beat them. Last year, they hired a big league star to come all the way from America, to act as coach. They don’t have enough ‘beef,’ as a rule, to make them heavy sluggers, but they are all there in bunting and place hitting, and they are like cats on the bases.”

“Yes,” said Dick, “and, even leaving foreigners out of the question, the crews from Uncle Sam’s warships have what you might call a Battleship League among themselves, and every vessel has its nine. Feeling runs high when they are in port, and the games are as hotly contested as though a World’s Series were in question. I’m told that, at the time of the Boxer rebellion, there were some dandy games played by our boys right under the walls of Peking.”

Just here the captain approached, and, with a hearty handshake and best wishes for the journey, Mr. Quinby went forward with him to discuss business details connected with the trip.

Ten o’clock, the hour set for starting, was at hand. The first bell, warning all visitors ashore, had already rung. The last bale of freight had been lowered into the hold and the hatches battened down. There was the usual rush of eleventh hour travelers, as the taxis and cabs rattled down to the piers and discharged their occupants. All the passengers were on the shore side of the vessel, calling to their friends on the dock, the women waving their handkerchiefs, at one moment, and, the next, putting them to their eyes. The last bell rang, the huge gangplank swung inward, there was a tinkling signal in the engine room and the propellers began slowly to revolve. The steamer turned down the bay, passed the Golden Gate where the sea lions sported around the rocks, and out into the mighty Pacific. The voyage of the *Fearless* had begun.

Down in the wireless room, Bert had buckled to his work. With the telephone receiver held close to his ears by a band passing over his head, he exchanged messages with the land they were so rapidly leaving behind them, with every revolution of the screws. Amid the crashing of the sounder and the spitting blue flames, he felt perfectly in his element. Here was work, here was usefulness, here was power, here was life. Between this stately vessel, with its costly cargo and still more precious freight of human lives, and the American continent, he was the sole connecting link. Through him alone, father talked with son, husband with wife, captain with owner, friend with friend. Without him, the vessel was a hermit, shut out from the world at large; with him, it still held its place in the universal life.

But this undercurrent of reflection and exultation did not, for a moment, distract him from his work. The messages came in rapidly. He knew they would. The first day at sea is always the busiest one. There were so many last injunctions, so many things forgotten in the haste of farewell, that he was taxed to the utmost to keep his work well in hand. Fortunately he was ambidextrous, could use his left hand almost as readily as his right, and this helped him immensely. From an early age, more from fun than anything else, he had cultivated writing with either hand, without any idea that the day would come when this would prove a valuable practical accomplishment. Now with one finger on the key, he rapidly wrote down the messages with the other, and thus was able to double the rapidity and effectiveness of his work.

Before long there was a lull in the flood of messages, and when time came for dinner, he signaled the San Francisco office to hold up any further communications for an hour or so, threw off his receiver, and joined his friends at the table.

“Well, Bert, how does she go?” asked Dick, who sat at his right, while Tom and Ralph faced them across the table.

“Fine,” answered Bert, enthusiastically. “It isn’t work; it’s pleasure. I’m so interested in it that I almost grudge the time it takes to eat, and that’s something new for me.”

“It must be getting serious, if it hits you as hard as that,” said Tom, in mock concern. “I’ll have to give the doctor a tip to keep his eye on you.”

“Oh, Bert just says that, so that when he gets seasick, he’ll have a good excuse for not coming to meals,” chaffed Ralph.

“Well, watch me, fellows, if you think my appetite is off,” retorted Bert, as he attacked his food with the avidity of a wolf.

“By the way,” asked Dick, “what arrangements have you made for any message that may come, while you are toying with your dinner in this languid fashion?”

“I’ve told the San Francisco man to hold things up for a while,” replied Bert. “That’s the only station we’re likely to hear from just now, and the worst of the rush is over. After we get out of range of the land stations, all that we’ll get will be from passing ships, and that will only be once in a while.”

“Of course,” he went on, “theoretically, there ought to be someone there every minute of the twenty-four hours. You might be there twenty-three hours and fifty-nine minutes, and nothing happen. But, in the last minute of the twenty-fourth hour, there might be something of vital importance. You know when that awful wreck occurred last year, the operator was just about to take the receiver from his head, when he caught the call. One minute later, and he wouldn’t have heard it and over eight hundred people would have been lost.”

“I suppose,” said Ralph, “that, as a matter of fact, there ought to be two or three shifts, so that someone could be on hand all the time. I know that the Company is considering something of the kind, but ‘large bodies move slowly,’ and they haven’t got to it yet.”

“For my part,” chimed in Tom, “I should think that with all the brains that are working on the subject, there would have been some way devised to make a record of every call, and warn the operator at any minute of the day or night.”

“They’re trying hard to get something practical,” said Bert. “Marconi himself is testing out a plan that he thinks will work all right. His idea is to get a call that will be really one long dash, so that it won’t be confounded with any letter of the alphabet. He figures on making this so strong that it will pass through a very sensitive instrument with sufficient force to ring a bell, that will be at the bedside of the operator.”

“Rather rough on a fellow, don’t you think?” joined in the ship’s doctor. “If he were at all nervous, he might lie there awake, waiting for the bell to ring. It reminds me of a friend of mine, who once put up at a country hotel. He was told that the man who slept in the next room was very irritable and a mere bundle of nerves. He couldn’t bear the least noise, and my friend promised to keep it in mind. He was out rather late that night, and when he started to retire he dropped one of his shoes heavily on the floor. Just then he remembered his nervous neighbor. He went on undressing quietly, walked about on tiptoe, put out the light, and crept into bed. Just as he was going off to sleep, a voice came from the other room: ‘Say, when in thunder are you going to drop that other shoe?’”

“In the meantime,” went on Bert, when the laugh had subsided, “they’ve got an ingenious device on some of the British ships. It seems rather cruel, because they have to use a frog. You know how sensitive frogs are to electricity. Well, they attach a frog to the receiving end, and under him they put a sheet of blackened paper. As the dots and dashes come in, the current jerks the frog’s legs over the paper. The leg scrapes the black away, and leaves white dots and dashes. So that you can pick up the paper and read the message just like any other, except that the letters are white instead of black.”

“Poor old frogs,” said Ralph. “If they knew enough, they’d curse the very name of electricity. Galvani started with them in the early days, and they’ve still got to ‘shake a leg’ in the interest of science.”

“Yes,” murmured Tom, “it’s simply shocking.”

He ducked as Ralph made a playful pass at him.

“There’s been quite a stir caused by it,” went on Bert, calmly ignoring Tom’s awful pun, “and the humane societies are taking it up. The probability is that it will be abolished. It certainly does seem cruel.”

“I don’t know,” said the doctor. “Like many other questions, there are two sides to it. We all agree that no pain should be inflicted upon poor dumb animals, unless there is some great good to be gained by it. But it is a law of life that the lesser must give way to the greater. We use the cow to get vaccine for small-pox, the horse to supply the anti-toxin for diphtheria. Rabbits and mice and guinea-pigs and monkeys we inoculate with the germs of cancer and consumption, in order to study the causes of these various diseases, and, perhaps, find a remedy for them. All this seems barbarous and cruel; but the common sense of mankind agrees that it would be far more cruel to let human beings suffer and die by the thousands, when these experiments may save them. If the twitching of a frog’s leg should save a vessel from shipwreck, we would have to overlook the frog’s natural reluctance to write the message. I hope, though,” he concluded, as he pushed back his chair, “that they’ll soon find something else that will do just as well, and leave the frog in his native puddle.”

When they reached the deck, they found that the breeze had freshened, and, with the wind on her starboard quarter, the *Fearless* was bowling along in capital style. Her engines were working powerfully and rhythmically, and everything betokened a rapid run to Hawaii, which the captain figured on reaching in about eight days. The more seasoned travelers were wrapped in rugs and stretched out in steamer chairs, but many of the others had already sought the seclusion of their staterooms. It was evident that there would be an abundance of empty seats at the table that evening.

Throughout the rest of the day the messages were few and far between. Before that time next day, they would probably have ceased altogether as far as the land stations were concerned, and from that time on until they reached Hawaii, the chief communications would be from passing ships within the wireless range.

The boys were gathered in the wireless room that night, telling stories and cracking jokes, when suddenly Bert’s ear caught a click. He straightened up and listened eagerly. Then his face went white and his eyes gleamed with excitement. It was the S. O. S. signal, the call of deadly need and peril. A moment more and he leaped to his feet.

“Call the captain, one of you fellows, quick,” he cried.

For this was the message that had winged its way over the dark waste of waters:

“Our ship is on fire. Latitude 37:12, longitude 126:17. For God’s sake, help.”

## CHAPTER IV

### The Flaming Ship

The captain came in hurriedly and read the message. He figured out the position.

“She’s all of sixty miles away,” he said, looking up from his calculation, “and even under forced draught we can’t reach her in less than three hours. Tell her we’re coming,” he ordered, and hurried out to give the necessary directions.

The course of the ship was altered at once, the engines were signaled for full speed ahead, and with her furnaces roaring, she rushed through the night to the aid of her sister vessel, sorely beset by the most dreaded peril of the sea.

In the mean time Bert had clicked off the message: “We’ve got you, old man. Ship, *Fearless*, Captain Manning. Longitude 125:20, latitude 36:54. Will be with you in three hours. Cheer up. If you’re not disabled, steam to meet us.”

Quickly the answer came back: “Thank God. Fighting the fire, but it’s getting beyond us. Hasn’t reached the engine room yet, but may very soon. Hurry.”

In short, jerky sentences came the story of the disaster. The steamer was the *Caledonian*, a tramp vessel, plying between Singapore and San Francisco. There was a heavy cargo and about forty passengers. A little while since, they had detected fire in the hold, but had concealed the fact from the passengers and had tried to stifle it by their own efforts. It had steadily gained, however, despite their desperate work, until the flames burst through the deck. A wild panic had ensued, but the captain and the mates had kept the upper hand. The crew had behaved well, and the boats were ready for launching if the worst came to the worst. The fire was gaining. “Hurry. Captain says – ”

Then the story ceased. Bert called and called again. No answer. The boys looked at each other.

“The dynamo must have gone out of commission,” said Bert. “I can’t get him. The flames may have driven him out of the wireless room.”

All were in an agony of suspense and fear. It seemed as though they crept, although the ship shook with the vibration of its powerful engines, working as they had never worked before. The *Fearless* was fairly flying, as though she knew the fearful need of haste.

Outside of the wireless room, none of the passengers knew of the disaster. Most of them had retired, and, if the few who were still up and about sensed anything unusual, the discipline of the ship kept questions unspoken. All the officers and the crew, however, were on the alert and tingling with the strain, and every eye was turned toward the distant horizon, to catch the first glimpse of the burning vessel.

Out into the night, Bert sent his call desperately, hoping to raise some other ship nearer to the doomed steamer than the *Fearless*, but in vain. He caught a collier, three hundred miles away, and a United States gunboat, one hundred and sixty miles distant, but, try as he would, there was nothing nearer. Nobody but themselves could attempt the rescue. Of course, there was the chance that some sailing vessel, not equipped with wireless, might come upon the scene, but this was so remote that it could be dismissed from consideration.

More than half the distance had been covered when Dick, who had stepped outside, came running in.

“Come on out, fellows,” he cried, excitedly. “We can see a light in the sky that we think must come from the fire.”

They followed him on the run. There, sure enough, on the distant horizon, was a deep reddish glow, that seemed to grow brighter with every passing moment. At times, it waned a trifle, probably obscured by smoke, only to reappear more crimson than ever, as the vessel drew nearer.

“How far off do you suppose it is now?” asked Tom.

“Not more than fifteen miles, I should think,” answered Bert. “We’ll be there in less than an hour now, if we can keep up this pace.”

The *Fearless* flew on, steadily cutting down the distance, and now the sky was the color of blood. Everything had been gotten in readiness for the work of rescue. The boats had been cleared and hung in their davits, ready to be lowered in a trice. Lines of hose were prepared, not so much with the hope of putting out the fire as to protect their own vessel from the flying brands. Every man of the crew was at his appointed place. Since the wireless could no longer be used to send messages of encouragement, rockets were sent up at intervals to tell the unfortunates that help was coming.

“Look!” cried Tom. “That was an actual flash I saw that time.”

Gradually these became more frequent, and now the upper part of the vessel came into view, wreathed in smoke and flame. Soon the hull appeared, and then they could get a clear idea of the catastrophe.

The whole forward part of the vessel was a seething mass of fire. The engines had been put out of commission, and the hull wallowed helplessly at the mercy of the waves. The officers and crew, fighting to the last, had been crowded aft, and the stern was black with passengers huddled despairingly together. The supply of boats had been insufficient, and two of these had been smashed in lowering. Two others, packed to the guards, had been pushed away from the vessel, so as not to be set on fire by the brands that fell in showers all around. Near the stern, some of the sailors were hastily trying to improvise a raft with spars and casks. They were working with superhuman energy, but, hampered as they were by the frantic passengers, could make but little progress. And all the time the pitiless flames were coming nearer and nearer, greedily licking up everything that disputed their advance. It was a scene of anguish and of panic such as had never been dreamed of by the breathless spectators who crowded the bow of the *Fearless*, as it swiftly swept into the zone of light and prepared to lower its boats.

Suddenly there was a great commotion visible on the flaming ship. They had seen their rescuers. Men shouted and pointed wildly; women screamed and fell on their knees in thanksgiving. The boats already in the water gave way and made for the *Fearless*. The sailors stopped work upon the raft, now no longer needed, and turned to with the officers who were striving desperately to keep the more frenzied passengers from plunging headlong into the sea and swimming to the steamer. Their last refuge in the stern had grown pitifully small now, and the flames, gathering volume as they advanced, rushed toward them as though determined not to be balked of the prey that had seemed so surely in their grasp.

It was a moment for quick action, and Captain Manning rose to the occasion. In obedience to his sharp word of command, the sailors tumbled into the boats, and these were dropped so smartly that they seemed to hit the water together. Out went the oars and away they pulled with all the strength and practised skill of their sinewy arms. Bert and Dick were permitted to go as volunteers in the boat of Mr. Collins, the first mate, who had given his consent with some reluctance, as he had little faith in any but regular sailors in cases of this kind; and his boat was the first to reach the vessel and round to under the stern.

“Women and children first,” the unwritten law of the sea, was strictly enforced, and they were lowered one by one, until the boat sat so low in the water that Mr. Collins ordered his crew to back away and let the next one take its place. Just as it got under way, a woman holding a baby in her arms, frantic with fright as she saw the boat leaving, broke away from the restraining hand of a sailor, and leaped from the stern. She missed the gig, which was fortunate, as she would certainly have capsized it, heavily laden as it already was, and fell into the water. In an instant Bert, who could swim like a fish, had plunged in and grabbed her as she rose to the surface. A few strokes of the oars and they were hauled aboard, and the boat made for the ship. Collins, a taciturn man, looked his approval but said nothing at the time, although, in a talk with the captain afterwards, he went so far as to revise his opinion of volunteers and to admit that an able seaman could have done no better.

The rest of the passengers were quickly taken off and then came the turn of the officers and crew. The captain was the last to leave the devoted vessel, and it was with a warm grasp of sympathy and understanding that Captain Manning greeted him as he came over the side. He was worn with the strain and shaken with emotion. He had done all that a man could do to save his ship, but fate had been too strong for him and he had to bow to the inevitable. He refused to go below and take some refreshment, but stood with knitted brows and folded arms watching the burning steamer that had carried his hopes and fortunes. They respected his grief and left him alone for a time, while they made arrangements for the homeless passengers and crew.

These were forlorn enough. They had saved practically no baggage and only the most cherished of their personal belongings. Some had been badly burned in their efforts to subdue the flames, and all were at the breaking point from excitement and fatigue. The doctors of both ships were taxed to the utmost, administering sedatives and tonics and dressing the wounds of the injured. By this time the passengers of the *Fearless* had, of course, been roused by the tumult, and men and women alike vied with each other in aiding the unfortunates. Cabins and staterooms were prepared for the passengers, while quarters in the forecabin were provided for the crew who, with the proverbial stolidity and fatalism of their kind, soon made themselves at home, taking the whole thing as a matter of course. They had just been at hand-grips with death; but this had occurred to them so often that they regarded it simply as an incident of their calling.

There was no thought of sleep for Bert that night. The sounder crashed and the blue flames leaped for hours in the wireless room. The operator of the *Caledonian* volunteered to help him, but Bert wouldn't hear of it and sent him to his bunk, where, after the terrific strain, he was soon in the sleep of utter exhaustion.

Then Bert called up the San Francisco station and told his story. The owners of the ship were notified that the vessel and cargo were a total loss, but that all the passengers had been saved. They sent their thanks to Captain Manning and then wirelessly for details. Mr. Quinby, of course, was called into the conference. Now that it was settled that no lives had been lost, the most important question was as to the disposition of passengers and crew. They had been making for San Francisco, but naturally it was out of the question for the *Fearless* to relinquish her voyage and take them into port.

Three courses were open. They could go to Hawaii, the first stopping place, and there take the first steamer leaving for San Francisco. Or they could depend on the chance of meeting some vessel homeward bound, to which they could transship before reaching Honolulu. Or Bert could send his call abroad through his wireless zone and perhaps arrange for some ship coming toward them to sail along a certain course, meet them at a given location and there take charge of the *Caledonian's* people. In that case, the owners, of course, would expect to recompense them handsomely for their time and trouble.

As the survivors were desperately anxious to reach home and friends at the earliest possible moment, Bert was instructed to follow the latter course and do his utmost to raise some approaching vessel. For a long time his efforts were fruitless. His call flew over the ocean wastes but awoke no answering echo. At last, however, well toward morning, his eager ear caught a responsive click. It came from the *Nippon*, one of the trans-Pacific liners plying between Yokohama and San Francisco. She was less than four hundred miles away and coming on a line slightly east of the *Fearless*. The situation was explained, and after the captains of the two steamers had carried on a long conversation, it was agreed that the *Nippon* should take charge of the survivors. They would probably meet late that afternoon, and arrangements were made to keep each other informed hourly of pace and direction, until they should come in sight.

Bert breathed a huge sigh of relief when that question was settled. But his work was not yet done. He must notify the United States Government of the presence of the derelict as a menace to navigation. The *Caledonian* had lost all its upper works and part of the hull had been consumed. But

the waves breaking over it as it lurched from side to side had kept it from burning to the water's edge, and it now tossed about, a helpless hulk right in the lane of ships. So many vessels have been lost by coming in collision with such floating wrecks at night, that the Government maintains a special line of gunboats, whose one duty is to search them out and blow them up with dynamite. Bert gave the exact latitude and longitude to the San Francisco operator, who promised to forward it at once to the Navy Department at Washington.

Then, at last, Bert leaned back in his chair and relaxed. The strain upon heart and nerve and brain had been tremendous. But he had "stood the gaff." The first great test had been nobly met. Cool, clever, self-reliant, he had not flinched or wavered under the load of responsibility. The emergency had challenged him and he had mastered it. In this work, so new to him, he had kept his courage and borne himself as a veteran of the key.

He patted the key affectionately. Good old wireless! How many parts it had played that night and how well! Telling first of pain and terror and begging for help; then cheerily sending hope and comfort and promise of salvation. Without it, the dawn would now be breaking on two small boats and a flimsy raft, crowded with miserable refugees and tossing up and down on the gray waves that threatened to engulf. Now they were safe, thank God, warm and snug and secure, soon to be called to the abundant breakfast, whose savory odors already assailed his nostrils. And now the whole world knew of the disaster and the rescue; and the machinery of the Government was moving with reference to that abandoned hulk; and a great ship was bounding toward them over the trackless waste to meet at a given place and time and take the survivors back to country and home and friends and love and life. It was wonderful, mysterious, unbelievable —

A touch upon his shoulder roused him from his reverie, and he looked up, to see the captain standing beside him.

"You've done great work this night, Wilson," he said, smiling gravely, "and I'll see that the owners hear of it. But now you must be dead tired, and I want you to get your breakfast and turn in for a while. I'll get Howland, the wireless man of the *Caledonian*, to hold things down for a few hours, while you get a rest. I've told the cook to get a bite ready for you and then I want you to tumble in."

The "bite" resolved itself into a capacious meal of steak and eggs, reinforced by fragrant coffee, after which, obeying orders, he rolled into his bunk and at once fell into deep and dreamless sleep.

Meanwhile, the ship awoke to the life of a new day. The sun streamed down from cloudless skies and a spanking breeze blew over the quarter. The air was like wine and to breathe it was an inspiration. The sea smiled and dimpled as its myriad waves reflected back the glorious light. The *Fearless* slipped through the long swells as swiftly as a water sprite, "footing it feately" on her road to Hawaii, the Paradise of the Pacific. Everything spoke of life and buoyancy, and the terrible events of the night before might well have been a frightful nightmare from which they had happily awakened.

There were grim reminders, however, that it had been more than a dream in the hurrying doctors, the bandaged hands and faces, the haggard features of the men and the semi-hysterical condition of some of the women. But there had been no death or mortal injury. The Red Death had gazed upon them with its flaming eyes and scorched them with its baleful breath, but they had not been consumed. There were property losses, but no wife had been snatched from her husband, no mother wailed for her child. Under the comforting influence of a hot breakfast, the heartfelt sympathy of the passengers and the invigorating air and sunshine, they gradually grew more cheerful. After all, they were alive, snatched by a miracle from a hideous death; and how could or dared they complain of minor ills? The tension relaxed as the hours wore on, and by the time that Bert, after a most refreshing sleep, appeared again on deck the scene was one of animation and almost gaiety.

Straight to the wireless room he went, to be met on the threshold by Dick and Tom and Ralph, who gathered around him in tumultuous greeting.

"Bully for you, old man," cried Dick. "We hear that you did yourself proud last night."

“Yes,” chimed in Ralph. “I wouldn’t dare to tell you what Father says in a message I’ve just received, or you’d have a swelled head, sure.”

“Nonsense,” answered Bert. “I simply did what it was up to me to do. Good morning, Mr. Howland,” he said, as the young fellow seated at the key rose to greet him. “How are things going?”

“Just jogging along,” answered Howland. “I guess you cleaned up about everything before you turned in. We’re getting beyond the shore range, but I’ve been keeping in touch every hour with the *Nippon*. The captain figures that we’ll get together at about four this afternoon.”

The former operator of the *Caledonian* was a well set-up, clear-eyed young fellow, about the age of Bert and his chums, and a liking sprang up between them at once. With the recuperative power of youth he had almost entirely recovered from the events of the night before, although his singed hair and eyebrows bore eloquent testimony to the perils he had faced and so narrowly escaped. He had stuck to his post until the blistering heat had made life impossible in the wireless room, and then had done yeoman’s work in aiding the officers and crew to fight the fire and maintain order among the passengers. The boys listened with keenest interest, while he went over in graphic style his personal experiences.

“I can’t tell you how I felt when I got your message,” he said, as he turned to Bert. “I had about given up hope when your answer came. I rushed at once to the captain and he passed the word to the passengers and crew. It put new heart and life into them all, and it was the only thing that kept many from jumping into the sea when the flames got so horribly near. But they held on desperately, and when they saw your rockets I wish you could have heard the cry that went up. They knew then that it was only a matter of minutes before your boats would be under the stern. But it was fearfully close figuring,” he went on, soberly. “You saw yourself that fifteen minutes after the last boat pulled away the whole stern was a mass of flames.”

“Well,” said Bert, as he slipped on the receiver, and took charge of the key, “it’s lucky that I got your call just when I did. A little later and I’d have been off duty.”

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