The GUN Runner

A story of "wireless" that will delight the thousands of readers of the "Wire-tappers." The plot centers around one of those South American revolutions in which by chance the wireless operator of the LAMINIAN comes to play the star part.

Arthur Stringer

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Presented by
Clifton C. Brown.
for best progress made
at School No. 8. Grafton
Sept. in the fall term of 1912
by one of the School Board.
Lewis C. Dane

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THE GUN-RUNNER

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THE GUN-RUNNER

A Novel

BY

ARTHUR STRINGER

Author of "The Wire-Tappers," "The Under Groove," "The Silver Poppy," etc., etc.

NEW YORK

B. W. DODGE & COMPANY

1909

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PREFATORY NOTE

A portion of this novel was printed in the January, 1909, ***number of "The Popular Magazine," under the same title which is here used for the story in its complete form.***

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DEDICATION

To my old bunkie and friend and camp-mate,

Major Charles Edward Mills

who in the good days that are gone was known as "Shorty," and knocked about all the blessed Seven Seas of the earth and smoked over campfires in four continents and adventured up and down the length of the two Americas and always loved War and Danger and the Open Road, and full many a time tramped and camped and hunted and went hungry with me, I most apprehensively yet affectionately inscribe this volume

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CHAPTER I

THE CITY OF PERIL

THE fog groped and felt its way along the water-front. Then it crept up to the throat of the city, like a grey hand, and strangled Broadway into an ominous quietness.

It tightened its grip, as the day grew older, leaving the cross-streets from Union Square to the Battery clotted with congested traffic. It brought on an untimely protest of blinking street-lamps, as uncannily bewildering as the mid-day cock-crowing of a solar eclipse. It caused the vague and shadowy walls of sky-scrapers to blossom into countless yellow window tiers, as close-packed as the scales of a snake. Bells sounded from gloom-wrapt shipping along the saw-tooth line of the river slips, tolling the watches and falling silent and tolling again, as they might have tolled in mid-ocean, or on some lonely waterway that led to the uttermost ends of the earth.

Now and then, out of the distance, a river-

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ferry or a car-float tug could be heard growling and whimpering for room, as it wrangled over its right-of-way. Everything moved slowly through the muffled streets. Carriages crept across the sepulchral quietness with a strange and uncouth reverence, like tourists through a catacomb. Surface cars, crawling funereally forward, felt their way with gong-strokes, as blind men feel their way with stick-taps. An occasional taxicab, swinging tentatively out of a side-street, slewed and skidded in the greasy mud. Lonely drivers watched from their seats, watched like sea captains from bridge-ends when ice has invaded their sea lanes.

Under the gas-lamps, dulled to a reddish yellow, passed a thin scattering of pedestrians. A touch of desolation clung about each figure that groped its way through the short-vistaed street, as though the thoroughfare it trod were a lonely moraine and the figure itself the last man that walked a ruined world. It was the worst fog that New York had known for years; the city lay under it like a mummy swathed in grey.

Yet the gloom seemed to crown it with a new wonder, to endow it with a new dignity. That all too shallow tongue of land that is lipped by the East and North rivers took on strange and undreamt-of distances. It lay engulfed in twilight mysteries, enriched with unlooked-for pos-

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sibilities. Its narrow acres of brick and stone and asphalt became something unbounded and infinite, as bewildering and wide as the open Atlantic. It seemed to harbour fantastic potentialities. It seemed to release the spirit of romance, as moonlight unfetters a lover's lips.

Yet Lingg, the wireless operator of the *Laminian,* became more and more alarmed at the opacity of this fog. He felt, as he burrowed mole-like across the mist-blanketed city, that he had been a fool to leave the ship. He should have listened to reason. And now he had missed his way. He was lost in the very heart of that vast and undecipherable wilderness, which had always filled him with a vague fear, even in the open sunlight, where its serrated skyline reminded him of a waiting trap-jaw. He was hopelessly at sea in the silence which surrounded him, overawed by the quietness which the turn of a street-corner might convert into some perilous ambuscade. Heilig, the engineer, had been right. He'd been a fool to come ashore.

He recalled, a little enviously, the figure of the engineer, the morose and lank and slatternly figure in ragged carpet-slippers, leaning against the ship's rail and smoking the long-stemmed German pipe with its blue china bowl. He remembered the engineer's impassive stare and his almost placid grunt of protest as he wheeled

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slowly round towards the solid land that he always seemed to hate.

"Where yuh off to, son?" he asked, as Lingg dropped to the splintered stringpiece of the wharf. The *Laminian* was chafing and fretting against that stringpiece just as his own soul had been chafing and fretting against the desolation of her empty decks.

"Ashore," Lingg answered, resolutely enough, yet against all the voices of better judgment.

"Wimmin?" demanded the laconic figure against the rail.

"No!" exploded the impatient youth.

"Then what yuh after?" persisted his gloomy interlocutor.

"What am I after?" echoed the other, having no answer ready.

"What d'yuh want with all *that?*" demanded the engineer, with a contemptuous pipe-wave that embraced the entire island of Manhattan.

"I guess I want to mind my own business," was the reproving answer. It was followed by a contemplative eye-blink or two from the man in the carpet-slippers. But the disgust did not go out of his face.

"No good comes o' knowin' hell-holes like this," he at last averred, with a slow and sagacious side-wag of his head. He spat into the

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slip water; it was a rite of his infinite contempt.

"I'm not going beyond Broadway," the half-repentant Lingg stopped to explain, marvelling at that strange and lonely seaman's fixed distrust of solid land. He did not think it worth while to enlarge on how sick he was of the ship stink and the quietness, of the fumes of rotting fruit, of the heavy musk-smell of harbour water, and the febrile rattle and clatter of donkey engines.

"Yuh'll find bad enough b'tween here and Broadway," avowed the placid misanthrope at the ship's rail, contemplating his pipe-smoke as though it were incense rising before the epitomised wisdom of all the ages.

But Lingg was not altogether looking for the bad. He had been remembering how one of the junior officers of the *Pretoria*, when in port, spent his two riotous days riding up and down in the Fifth Avenue 'buses, the delirious 'buses, which he described as "bee-hives of swarming beauty," where he was ignored and elbowed and walked over by "the finest women who ever wore feathers," to his hungering heart's content. And Lingg, too, was hungering for some glimpse of life beyond that of a dirty fore-deck; for a sight of faces less satyr-like than that of a brandy-steeped sea captain. He

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wanted to see light and colour and movement. The unpurged emotional tracts of youth ached for some undiscerned adventure. But above all he was swayed by a wordless, yet none the less compelling hunger to behold the faces of women and girls. Some subliminal sex-hunger, after so many empty days at sea, made him long for that vague upper world which seemed embodied in this very word, *Girls*. He wanted to see them, good or bad, with painted faces or pure. It scarcely mattered, so long as he could look at them. They would all be goddesses to him, Olympian beings who breathed some diviner air, trailing clouds of mystery after their most casual footsteps. He did not ask to walk or speak with them. Their lowliest skirt-swish would seem only too like the ruffle of angel wings. He merely wanted to brush against them, indeterminately, in the city's crowded places, to watch their coming and going, to hear their occasional voices, to let his eyes dwell on their faces as a seaman looks at passing land-lights. For Lingg was still young, clean-living and clean-thoughted beyond the ways of the sailor. Heilig's assistant on the *Laminian* had more than once spoken of him as "Mealy-mouth."

And then, amazingly enough, came the girl herself, without sign or warning.

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Where she fluttered or fell from he scarcely knew. It was somewhere in one of the quieter side-streets, and they were standing face to face, almost, when he looked up and saw her. Had he seen a mermaid over the ship's rail it could not have startled him more. There was no evading the situation; there was no chance of being mistaken. It was Adventure, in answer to his prayer. It was Romance, as he had asked. And he had never so much as clapped eyes on her before. Nor was her face a painted face. There was no betraying cupid-bow streak of carmine on the softly smiling lips. There was no barbaric black gum on the undrooping eyelashes, no tell-tale blue paint on the eyelids. There were no disquieting blandishments, no sidelong and predatory glances, no ensnaring simulation of tender levity. His startled eyes could detect no granite savagery under the velvet of her unconcern. She seemed merely Woman incarnate to him, the sort of woman he had sometimes dreamt about on tropic nights when the Southern Cross swung low to the skyline.

"You are Gustav Lingg," she said quietly, and as plain as day, while his wide eyes still studied every tint and shadow and line of her untroubled face. On that face he seemed to

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see nothing but a gentle yet determined abstraction.

"Y—yes," he stammered, vacuously, as though her statement had been a question. A faint tingle of something that was neither fear nor delight went needling up and down his backbone.

"I want to talk to you," the woman said, quite gravely. "I must talk to you—alone."

He knew that she had turned and joined him as he moved wonderingly forward, with his staring eyes still on her. Then the futility, the hopelessness, the impossibility of it all suddenly came home to him. He was conscious of a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. Courage sank away from him, confidence sucked out of him, like water out of an unplugged bath-bowl.

If she had only stood before him less alluring, less Olympian in her loveliness, he might have been less bewildered. If she had been the Other Kind, openly and unequivocally, he might have grown less afraid of her.

But he felt and knew it was a mistake, a foolish and colossal mistake. A vague and slowly mounting fear took the place of his earlier astonishment. The city itself had already intimidated him. He remembered the engineer's opprobrious summing-up of its perils. There was something amiss, terribly amiss.

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He raised his hat from his head awkwardly, muttering he scarcely knew what, as he heard her voice again. He backed away from her as she essayed to draw nearer, and stumbled, almost drunkenly, while she stood regarding him in open wonder. Then he turned and fled from her, fled from her, abashed and tingling, fled from her blindly, like a field-mouse from a coiled blacksnake.

He did not stop until he had rounded a street-corner. He felt, as he did so, that he was demeaning his manhood before some possible high adventure. He vaguely suspected that one of life's vast occasions had slipped away from him unrecognised. But he was still afraid, foolishly afraid. He was glad to dip deeper and deeper into the city, as though it were a cleansing bath that might wash away his lubberly awkwardness. He was glad when the fog crept into the streets and helped to obliterate him and his shame. He was glad to wander unknown and unrecognised about the grey-draped solitude that engulfed him.

He knew that the woman had not followed him. But all that afternoon he wandered and tarried and walked about with the feeling that he was not alone. He kept looking over his shoulder from time to time, pondering some wordless yet persistent sense of disquiet. He

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felt as though he were being shadowed. He could not shake off the impression that some vague figure or two was guardedly dogging his footsteps.

This sense of being shadowed grew stronger as night came on. It made him doubly anxious to get back to his ship, to know the security of his bald, little, white-painted cabin. It caused him to reiterate to himself the engineer's morose dictum that the city was not to be trusted. He had hungered for the Unexpected; he had been restless for his emprising hour or two on land. But this, he muttered to himself, was the kind of night that took all the curl out of Romance. He was not worthy of the venture. He was better suited to the quietness of a ship's cabin. He disliked the thought of the two pacing shadows that seemed to be following him through the fog. He wanted the *Laminian's* dirty fore-deck once more under his feet.

He designedly kept out of all danger zones, to make security doubly sure. A thick-voiced man with a black muffler about his throat had trailed after him to demand if he had no old clothes to dispose of. But he did not so much as stop to answer. A stranger in a Stetson hat, still later, caught companionably at his arm and implored him to drink with him. But he freed himself sharply and kept on his way. A figure

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or two blocked his path ominously, but he skirted them, as a careful pilot skirts his channel-buoys. He did not care to run risks. He felt that he was still in the land of the enemy. He kept to the open, blindly and doggedly. He knew but one goal, and that goal lay beyond the *Laminian's* odorous gangplank. He fought his devious way towards it, like a spawning sock-eye fighting its way to a river source.

He hurried along the fog-wrapt cañons, still haunted by the impression of some unknown figure dogging his steps. He felt, as night and the fog deepened together, that the city was nothing more than a many-channeled river-bed, and that he waded along its bottom, breathing a new element, too thick for air, too etherealised for water. He saw streets that were new to him, streets where the misted globes of electric lights became an undulating double row of white tulips. Then he stumbled into Broadway. But it was a Broadway with the soft pedal on. Its roar of sound was so muffled he scarcely knew it. Then he came to a square where the scattered lamp-globes looked like bubbles of gold caught in tree-branches. Under these tree-branches he saw loungers on benches, mysterious and motionless figures, like broken rows of statuary, sleeping men in the final and casual attitudes of death. Above these figures he could see wet maple-

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leaves, hanging as still and lifeless as though they had been stencilled from sheets of green copper. His eyes fell on floating street-signs, blurs of coloured electrics cut off from the invisible walls which backed them. He caught glimpses of the softened bulbs of automatic signs, like moving gold-fish seen through frosted glass. Then he saw more lights, serried lights, subdued into balloons of misty pearl. They threaded the façade of some gigantic hotel, like jewel-strings about the throat of a barbaric woman. But he could not remember the place. And again he floundered on towards the water-front, disquieted with vague and foolish thoughts, as much oppressed by the orderly streets as though he were escaping from some sea-worn harbour slum of vice and outlawry. He still wanted his cabin, as a long-harried chipmunk wants its tree-hole.

He was well out of it, he told himself reassuringly, though he still kept wondering why the woman had stopped him. He remembered details of her dress, the sense of assurance and well-being in her mere figure poise, the open way in which her eyes had met his. He began to wonder why he had lacked the audacity to respond to that clear challenge of fate. He demanded of himself why he had run away from the very thing he had been seeking.

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He knew, as the growl of the ferry-whistles grew louder, that he was nearing the river. He felt as ungainly as a tortoise scuffling back to its water-edge of escape, but his confidence began to return to him as he found himself nearer and nearer his brink of delivery. He could perceive the ridiculous figure he had cut. He could even realise that he had defeated his own ends. He was conscious of a growing overtone of discontent, a peevish resentment against his own white-livered irresolution. And he would go aboard, and the next day be out at sea, with the mystery of it all still unanswered.

He strode on through the fog. It was not until he came to a narrow street-crossing between two blank-windowed warehouses that he saw his way obstructed. But he noticed, as he came to a sudden stop, that his path was barred by a cab with an open door. It blocked the crossing, very much as a Neapolitan *corricolo* manœuvres for a fare by cutting across a pedestrian's path.

The youth drew up and peered in through that door, with a slightly quickened pulse, wondering why the impassive figure on the box should be thus blocking his way.

Then he saw that the cab was not empty.

Leaning quietly forward from the seat was

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an intent and waiting figure—a woman's figure. It was the woman from whom he had so ignominiously fled.

He felt, this time, no horripilating tingle of shock. His fund of wonder seemed to be exhausted. He stood staring at her, almost abstractedly, with the mild and resigned bewilderment of a man who has seen lightning strike twice in the same spot.

"Quick!" said the woman, with an almost imperious movement of her gloved hand.

"What?" asked Lingg, inadequately, irrelevantly.

"I wanted to warn you," the woman whispered, as she moved back on the cab seat, obviously to make room for him. "I *must* warn you —but not here."

"Of what?" asked Lingg. He saw that she was quite alone in the cab.

"Come!" she commanded, ignoring his question.

He stepped into the hooded gloom like a coerced schoolboy. He was not afraid, he assured himself. It was merely that he was unwilling to be made the blind tool of forces he could not comprehend.

"Of what?" he repeated, noticing that the cab moved forward the moment the door had slammed shut.

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"Not to sail on the *Laminian*," said the woman at his side. He could detect a subtle perfume about her presence, a flowery and effeminising perfume which made him think of New England village gardens. An older man would have thought of boudoirs.

"Why not?" he asked. The woman could see that he was not as impressed as he might be.

"It will not be safe."

"It never is, on those third-class boats."

He insisted on being literal or nothing.

"But there are dangers ahead of you—dangers you don't and can't understand."

"I don't see how I can help that," said the youth of little imagination. "When the Company puts me on a ship or gives me a station anywheres, I've got to stick to it."

"Then you don't believe me?"

"It's not a matter of believing. It's more a matter of not understanding you."

A change seemed to creep over her, a lightening and relaxing change, such as would come to the New England garden he had thought of when it passed from shadow to sunlight.

"Would you like to understand me?" she asked, turning her eyes full on his somewhat abashed young face. He blushed and tingled under the directness of her gaze.

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"How could I?" he succeeded in stammering out.

"Won't you stay and try?" she murmured, pregnantly.

The prospect did not exactly appal him. It merely puzzled him now as something beyond the reach of his delimited imagination. The curl hadn't been taken out of Romance, after all, he told himself. He could see the brooding spirit of her, incarnate before his very eyes, coifed and gowned like a goddess. But the very radiance of the vision made him doubly afraid of her.

"I'm afraid I'll have to get back," was his hesitating rejoinder.

"Back where?"

"To my ship," he faltered.

"But you *mustn't!*" she murmured, with a solicitous hand on his still tingling arm.

"I've got to get back," he persisted, reaching and fumbling for the door.

"But not yet—not here," she begged him.

"I *must*," he declared, trying to stand on his feet under the cramping cab-hood, and tugging at the door-handle.

"Only listen to me for a moment," the woman was saying, almost pleadingly.

He allowed her to draw him gently back into

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the seat beside her. But disquiet had again taken possession of him.

"Am I so terrible?" she asked, with her hand still on his arm. Her voice was low and quiet; her half-smiling lips were parted a little, giving a touch of languid abandon to her otherwise intent and earnest face. And here was the very thing he had been so restlessly in search of; but now that it was before him, within his grasp, he was wordlessly afraid of it.

"N—no, you're not terrible," he jerkily reassured her, as though the words had to be paid out like links of a rusted cable.

"You're not afraid of me?" she inquired, with a disarming soft intimacy of tone that sent the blood once more rioting through his veins. He did not answer. He merely gazed at her in inarticulate and tingling wonder.

"You're not, are you?" she persisted, stooping forward and turning her body about in the cab seat so that her face was directly before him, within a foot of his own.

"No," he managed to say.

He noticed that she almost closed her eyes.

"Then kiss me," he heard her low voice murmuring, with her parted red lips lifting and creeping audaciously up to his, her hand already on his shoulder.

He drew back, white and stunned. It was

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beyond reason. It was so beyond reason that it brought a hundred unkenneled suspicions yelping and snapping about him. Things that once seemed accidental and trivial took on a new significance. He could carpenter inconsequentialities into dim and towering structures of intrigue. He was afraid of himself and his surroundings.

The woman must have seen this the very moment she locked her arms about his reluctant neck, for her face changed and hardened. Even before he saw that change, though, he was crowding and struggling and pulling away from her.

The entire situation was so unlooked-for, so startling, that no new turn of it could add to his sense of surprise. He was conscious of the fact that she was crying out, while she still clung to him, and that the cab had come to a sudden stop. He noticed a figure at the door and a man's huge hand dart in towards him as it swung open. And still again he heard her shriek of simulated fear. It might even have been anger—he was not sure; he could not fathom it all. But he felt, dimly, that he was being tricked into something beyond his understanding; that the whole thing was some sort of trap. He resented being clawed at; he resented the way in which the man at the cab door was dragging and pulling him

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to the street. There was no longer any doubt as to that intruder's immediate intention.

The wireless operator's one passion was to escape, to fight his way back to freedom. He remembered his ship and his waiting station, and how Heilig, the engineer, would have the laugh on him.

He was fighting like a terrier by this time, striking out blindly, in a frenzy of sheer panic. He was stung by the injustice of it all, and kept calling and shouting for help as he fought, fortified by the memory that his hands were clean, that he had done nothing amiss.

He was dazed and bruised, but he still fought and shouted, imagining it was his opponent's mad intention to kill him. He saw the shifting figures of men appear through the fog, and stand about in a circle, impassively watching his struggles. But still he fought and shouted.

His cries brought a patrolman with a nightstick in his hand. He could see the circle disrupted and scattered. He could hear the relieving sound of the falling club on the body of the brute above him, and sharp oaths and grunts, and then cries and counter-cries.

Then a fourth figure pushed peremptorily in through the re-formed circle of onlookers, a figure not in uniform, but quick-acting and authoritative. This newcomer seemed to pull the

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entangled and struggling trio apart in one breath, as a child separates a puzzle-picture. He flung back the clubbing patrolman. He swept aside the still fighting second figure. He dragged the fallen operator to his feet, with a sharp question or two at the other man, who was blowing his nose on a handkerchief maculated with blood. Then he called out to the waiting cab-driver: "To the police station, straight!" and all but carried the dazed operator back into the waiting carriage.

He turned at the step, before following the operator into that cab, and spoke a crisp word or two to the still blinking patrolman. Then he lurched angrily and impatiently into the cab and slammed the door shut as they went clattering and swinging away through the heavy fog.

He left the patrolman gazing after him through the gloom, his idle night-stick dangling from his wrist like a bird's broken wing.

"Can you beat it!" gasped the astounded officer to the other man busy prodding and feeling his own body, very much as a housewife might explore a market-fowl.

"*You'd* beat it, all right!" retorted the other, disgustedly, with seismic-like rumblings of the chest. "You hare-brained bulls'd beat anything!"

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"But what's this all about, anyway?" demanded the bewildered officer, shouldering out through the crowd with the other man at his heels.

"God only knows," was that other man's retort, morosely brushing his battered hat with the palm of his hand.

"But who *is* he?"

"Who's who?"

"The guy who flashed that Central Office shield."

"One o' Wilkie's men."

"Wilkie?"

"Chief Wilkie, of the Washington Bureau; and we've made a nice mess o' this little coup o' his between us!"

"Then where's the rib figurin' in it?" asked the still perplexed officer.

"The rib?"

"The woman with the Fifth Avenue make-up."

"Oh, that's Cherry Purcelle—she's the come-on for the Washington Bureau people."

"Bureau—what Bureau?" asked the officer, still in the dark.

"The Secret Service Bureau, you pin-head!" The man speaking had just discovered a rib abrasion that made him wince with pain.

"Then why t'ell didn't you put me wise? I

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might've fanned the bean-boxes off some o' you folks!"

"You make me sick!" said the disgusted one, still preoccupiedly feeling about a bruised shoulder. "What d'you suppose it's called Secret Service for, if you've got to advertise it on every street-corner?"

The officer was slow to comprehend the situation.

"But I thought Wilkie only muckraked round after counterfeiters."

"He does any old thing his Uncle Sam sets him at."

"Then what're they holdin' up that quiet-lookin' young feller for? What're they runnin' *him* in for, anyway?"

"Mebbe they don't want him to sail to-morrow."

"But why shouldn't he sail to-morrow? Has he *done* anything?"

"Oh, cut it out!—cut it out! and get me to the nearest drugstore. I hate dirty work like this!"

"Then why're you doin' it?"

The other man did not answer, and the question was repeated.

"War's war!" was all he said. And he emitted the laconism as though he had no love for the subject from which it sprang.

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"You may as well put me wise," suggested the still waiting officer.

"I said this was *Secret Service*, didn't I?" grunted the other. "Where'd you say that drug-store was?"

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CHAPTER II

THE SPARK IN THE GAP

"ARE you the operator?" asked a passenger in a black rain-coat, blocking the doorway of the *Laminian's* wireless-room.

The fog of the night before had given way to a driving rain, like a sulky woman who finally and openly surrenders to tears. New York lay behind the *Laminian* and her passengers, seeming, under the soft torrent of those tears, a many-towered city of loaf-sugar which dissolved lower and lower into the flat line of the horizon.

The stranger in the doorway repeated his question.

"I'm *going* to be," came the answer from the coatless figure bent over its mystic apparatus. He had not so much as turned to face his interlocutor.

"Mean it's your first run?" inquired the huge and genial spirit of the doorway. This question, like his first, remained unanswered. So he repeated it in a tone of mild and attained humility.

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"I can't be an operator until I've got something to operate on," said the voice from the room. Its barbed curtness of tone no more reached the quick of the newcomer than water could reach a duck's breast.

"Then you're not sending yet?" he amiably persisted, with his shoulder against the door-post.

"Not till I've tuned up this pile of *junk!*" was the preoccupied answer of the operator, bent low over his work.

"You don't mean she's off her trolley, our first hour out?" asked the other. His patience seemed infinite. He still stood there, studying the shirt-sleeved figure in the centre of the room.

"I can't make her spark right. And I've got a damp helix and a motor running weak!"

The words were followed by a gasp of exasperation and the rattle of a tool flung to the floor.

The huge-shouldered man in the raincoat made no effort to conceal his disappointment. It was what one deserved, he conceded, for travelling in such a punk-riveted, slush-pitted, coal-eating second-rater!

But he remained up on the bridge-deck. He continued to lean nonchalantly against the dripping rail, peering out from under bushy iron-grey eyebrows drawn close to the flat-bridged

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nose, unmindful of the rain that beat in from the northeast as the *Laminian* plowed her way down through the Narrows and the Lower Bay. His red-rimmed, many-wrinkled eyes were still on the horizon, and his massive, russet hand was still clamped on the white awning-stanchion as Sandy Hook was passed and Atlantic Highlands melted down into a vague monotone of rain-swept loneliness.

Beyond the ship's officers, who fretted uncertainly back and forth along the bridge, his figure was the only one on the deserted deck. As the mist shut off the last dull line of Navesink, and the nose of the steamer swung southward, rising and dipping in the long ground-swell of the open Atlantic, the watching man gave vent to an involuntary sigh of relief.

But he still stood there, in the slanting rain, while the deck beneath his feet shook with the purposeful throb of the engines under their "full steam ahead," and the pulsating and ponderous thing of steel, "carrying a bone in her teeth," shouldered her way on through a ghost-like world of sea and rain. She seemed, for all her pitted and rust-stained plates, dignified with some new-found sense of mystery, of austere and unknown missions, as she sought out her predestined path through the grey loneliness of her universe. She seemed humanised, endowed

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with the will of a sentient and reasoning being.

The stranger looked about quickly, as the thick-necked, short-legged captain, in dripping oilskins, leaned over the port bridge-gate and called back along the empty deck:

"You, there!—are you gettin' anything?"

There was no answer to his call.

"Aren't you gettin' that ship out there?" he demanded peremptorily, as he flung the rain-drops from his cap-brim with a bull-like shake of the head.

He leaned on the wet rail and waited. But still there was no answer to his question. So he repeated it, this time in a bellow. Then came the sound of a chair being pushed back on deck-boards in the wireless-room, and the rattle of a quickly opened shutter.

"I'll have her in five minutes," answered the operator. The shutter closed again, sharply. Captain Yandel, the master of the *Laminian*, mumbled under his breath, and turned back to the bridge.

The man in the raincoat swung casually about on his heel and studied the operator's station, where the after-deck superstructure rose squat and square as a scow-cabin out of the bleached flooring of the weather-deck. He peered up to where the "T" aerials of phosphor-bronze wire on their ashwood stretchers bridged the two

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mastheads; he followed the course of those united wires as they led down into the square little station.

Next to this station, on the right, was the ship's lamp-room. In front of it stood the flag-locker. Farther along the deck, he noted, came the chart-room, and then the captain's cabin. In front of that again was the wheel-house and the canvas-strapped bridge.

On this bridge an officer, unsheathing a glass, was peering out to sea. The stranger followed the direction of the pointed glass and made out the ponderously rocking mass of a battleship as she crept up on them through the mist. There was something ominous and authoritative about her, with her sullen turrets and her monotone of colour, as she belched out her black smoke-plumes that hung low on the sky-line.

Then the stranger in the dripping raincoat swung sharply about and looked up at the mast-head. As he did so he saw a nervous blue spark appear and disappear at the ends of the taut-strung aerials that cradled back and forth with every dip and plunge of the ship. A muffled crash and clatter of sound echoed out of the closed station; a simultaneous kiss and crackle of broken noise came from the masthead.

It was the wireless operator at last working his key. It was the Hertzian waves, erupting

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from the mended coils, winging their way with the speed of light out through the loneliness of the rain-fogged afternoon.

Then came a space of silence, interrupted by the sudden appearance of the operator, still in his shirt-sleeves, with his coat held over his head like a hood. He strode forward to the bridge-gate, where he was met by the waiting captain. Together they bent over a sheet from a tinted form-pad. Then the hooded figure hurried back to the station, and the slam of a door punctuated his disappearance from sight.

The man in the raincoat turned back to the battleship, and stood thoughtfully regarding the bursts of foam on her plunging cutwater and the intermittent shower of spray as she rose and dipped in the cross-swell. Through the engine-room skylight behind him came the call of subterranean voices, the busy clangour of iron scraping on iron, the quick slam of furnace doors, magnified in the open shaft-head to sounds of titanic proportions. As he stood there a deck steward mounted the brass-plated stairway, carrying a tray with coffee-cake and steaming cups of tea.

The man at the rail wheeled about quickly at the unexpected sound of a voice so close behind him. He declined the proffered refreshment bruskly and swung back to his earlier position,

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staring out at the battleship. The steward took up his tray and passed on to the operator's door, where, adroitly balancing on one foot, he tapped on the panel with the other.

The door opened, and this time the white glare of the electric light shone along the wet deck. The man at the rail, twisting his head, without any betraying movement of the body, succeeded in getting a more satisfactory glimpse of the room.

Behind the door swung a curtain of soiled denim, partly withdrawn. Squatting on a canvas camp-chair before his unpainted work-table was the operator. His wireless helmet-receiver, or "set," was clasped over his ears and held close to the bent head by a chaplet of glimmering metal. Against each "receiver" the operator pressed a white handkerchief, to shut away outside noises.

His face was lean, clear-cut, touched with vigour. It was too vital and youthful in texture to be called leathery, though it was sunburnt to what seemed almost a coffee-colour, contrasting strangely with the ruddiness of the open-weathered ship's officers about him. He had, too, a touch of the ascetic in the high brow and the wide cheek-bones, his leanness of jowl giving one the impression of generous reservoirs of energy greedily and continually drained by

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some ever-adventuring thirst for activity. Though his eyes were impersonally studious and abstracted, there was a redeeming line or two of humour about the mouth. His hands were long and bony and slender, with something persistently scholar-like about them, for all their scarred and calloused and sinewed strength. This impression was further borne out by the restless, uncoördinated, and at times, almost wolf-like restlessness of the spare and nervous body as he passed back and forth in the narrow cabin. There seemed something unsubjugated in his long strides, as though he and his great length of limb had not yet grown used to confined places. This sense of an achieved repression was strengthened by the touch of audacity about the wide and clear-seeing eyes as he circled his room or sat sprawlingly before his instruments—of an audacity tempered with intelligence.

He nodded cheerfully enough to the steward, however, at the sight of the coffee-cake and the steaming tea. Then he turned back to his responder. The steward, leaving his tea and cake on the seat of a broken-armed steamer-chair, went on his way, and the deck was again deserted.

"Why aren't you getting the *Princeton*, there?" Captain Yandel once more demanded

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from the bridge-gate. It was plain to see his feeling for the new operator was not an over-kindly one.

The new operator showed his head round one corner of the stateroom.

"I'll try again!"

Once more came the hiss and rattle and crackle of the spark, and once more the lean and sun-tanned face appeared round a corner of the stateroom.

"He's busy talking to the navy-yard!"

"To what?"

"To the navy-yard."

"What'd he tell you?"

The new operator hesitated for a moment or two before answering. His singularly quiet eyes were resting on Captain Yandel's nose, for it was a remarkable nose, something between a cardinal and magenta colour, stippled with the brighter hues of countless little broken veins.

"He told me to shut up, and cut out!" he answered at last, editing the irate officer's blasphemy out of the message.

The passenger in the raincoat fell to pacing the open deck. He stopped once or twice, quite casually, to glance in at the wireless apparatus. Then, seeing that the operator had taken off his ear-phones and was leaning back in his canvas chair, giving his open and undivided attention

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to the tea and coffee-cake, the stranger came to a stop and leaned companionably against the jamb of the open door.

The young man glanced up at the huge figure darkening his cabin. He did so with no outward sign of emotion. He had, apparently, become inured to the wondering eyes of the passengers, and he had his own ends to pursue. So he went on with his coffee-cake in silence.

"Could you take those messages of mine now?" asked the man in the raincoat.

"Any old time now," answered the operator, without so much as a second glance.

"I settle for it with you, don't I?" asked the stranger, drawing out a roll of bills. The formidable dimensions of that roll were lost on the man bending over the teacup.

"Leave your name and cabin number, and pay the purser. They don't seem to trust operators on this floating palace! All I do is stamp the time-check on the message and send it out."

He took the two messages, stamped them, and read them aloud, before pencilling the number of words on a corner of each sheet and stabbing it on his "send" hook. He read, perfunctorily:

VARREL, Sixty Wall Street, New York.

Our man on board *Laminian* bound Puerto Locombia. Wire Washington. Will have him held by authorities to await instructions.

DUFFY.

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The second message he read off quite as hastily, and with equal nonchalance:

DOCTOR BERNADO MORALES, Mobile.
Advise Charleston wireless to relay *Laminian* southward bound if shipment of laundry equipment and steel ties left Mobile for Ganley and date of sailing. MICHAEL DUFFY.

The stranger waited a moment at the door, as though expecting some further word or movement from the operator.

But the man of the key was already busy over his "tuner." So the stranger in the raincoat turned away, with a look of mild exasperation in his predaceous and puzzled little eyes.

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CHAPTER III

THE CALL FROM WITHOUT

It was four hours later that the man in the raincoat reappeared on the bridge deck. The night was thick, and McKinnon, the operator, worked with his coat off and his door hooked back against the wall-plates.

He looked up for only a moment as he saw the huge figure once more confronting him. The stranger, unrebuffed by his silence, stepped calmly inside.

"Anything come in over this machinery o' yours for me?" he inquired as he took out a cigar, pushed his hat back on his head, and struck a light. The operator looked up with his habitually abstracted and unseeing stare.

"What's the name?" he asked, once more studying his "tuner."

The other was indignantly silent for a moment; then he laughed a little, forgivingly. "Duffy," he answered. "Michael Duffy."

The operator shook his head; the movement

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was followed by another minute or two of silence.

"It might've come under the name of Cody, Richard Cody," explained the intruder. Something in the younger man's smile caused him to add: "You see, that's our firm name, Duffy & Cody."

An alias, south of the twentieth parallel, often enough carries its own explanation. The *Laminian's* bow was pointing towards a land of patriots where a change of name only too often synchronised with a change of continents. But McKinnon merely gave a shake of the head. It was several minutes before he glanced about at the other man, with a closeness of scrutiny that might have been impertinent had it seemed less frankly impersonal.

"There's nothing in for passengers this trip," he announced as he turned back to his "tuner." He drummed impatiently on the table-edge for a moment before readjusting his helmet-receiver. But the huge-shouldered intruder was not to be so easily shaken off.

"Your machine's working, isn't it?" he asked, preoccupied with an inspection of the end of his cigar. This cigar was soft and thick and short, like his own fingers. Despite its dark and baleful colour, he kept inhaling and expelling great lungsful of it as he talked. The

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operator idly registered the mental decision that cigars such as those were surely of Honduran make.

"I saw you giving a message to the captain, didn't I?" And again the bellows-like lungs expelled their languid cloud.

"That was not to take on coffee at Puerto Locombia!" answered McKinnon. He delivered himself of this information casually, almost with amusement, though his half-averted eyes were not unconscious of the effect produced by what he had said.

The stranger was suddenly offering him one of the thick, short cigars. A shadow seemed to have lifted from his face.

"I don't smoke," said the ungracious man at the key, seeming to draw back into his shell of reticence. "And I'm busy sending."

"You mean you're actually talking to New York now?" amiably persisted the other. The operator's hand went out to the switch, black against the unpainted boards, and flanked on either side by a fuse.

"I've been tuning for Atlantic City. We're just picking him up," he answered as his fingers hovered over the starting-box lever, clamped to the same pine boards, above the switch. A sudden deep buzzing filled the cabin. It grew louder and louder as the lever crossed

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farther and farther down on the contact-pins. It sounded like a hive of bees stirred into anger. The stranger peered in at the dynamo under the operating table.

"So you're talking!" he murmured meditatively, appreciatively.

"How long will you be in communication with them?" he went on after a second or two of thought.

The other raised an earphone to listen, as the question was repeated. Then he turned back and bent over the carborundum tip between his responder-points.

"We're never really out of touch with 'em, on this run," he retorted. He seemed to resent his own increasing concessions to the other's imperturbable good-nature.

"You mean you can call up New York from the Caribbean?"

The operator put down his earphones and shook out his small cardboard box of carborundum fragments, picking through them for a fresh piece for his responder-points. It seemed apparent enough, to the patient-eyed man across the cabin from him, that he was neither friendly nor unfriendly; it was simply that he was busy.

"No, I don't mean that, exactly. New York never works south of Atlantic City, as a rule. He's got too much to handle there, too many

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ships going in and out. But New York can relay to Galilee and then down to NF—that's Norfolk—and from there on to Hatteras. Then Hatteras could throw a message over to Charleston, and if we're depending on land stations alone, Charleston can relay to Savannah, and then Savannah can get in touch with the naval station at Saint Augustine."

"And then where?" asked the stranger, leaning back against the cabin wall.

"Then Key West could catch it up, and if there wasn't a gunboat or an Atlas fruit liner crawling somewhere around Cuba, why, the navy yard at Guantanamo could get it relayed over to Limon, and from Limon, in decent weather, you'd catch the navy yard operator at Colon. And if the night was clear, you'd run one chance in a hundred of waking up the Cocoanut Trail aerials behind Puerto Locombia."

There was a moment or two of silence.

"Could Puerto Locombia get anything outside of a passing ship? Kingston, for instance?"

"Kingston never had wireless—it's prohibited by the British Government."

"Then there's New Orleans, on a pinch."

"There's too much map between," explained the operator. He gathered up his box of scattered carborundum.

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"Queer, isn't it, getting words on a tape that way, four hundred miles off?" said the stranger. He scratched his huge head in a sort of mute astonishment, as he surveyed the cabinful of apparatus.

"We don't use a tape," the other corrected, waving a preoccupied hand toward the inscription on the condenser case. "We're De Forest! And we don't claim to talk around the world yet."

The stranger was peering contentedly and aimlessly about the crowded little cabin. "Where the devil d'you suppose that cruiser was off to?" he next inquired.

"That's what *I've* been trying to find out."

"They all carry wireless?" asked the other as he sent an exhalation of pungent cigar smoke ceilingward.

"Yes; but they're not aching to talk just yet. Wait till they've been lying down there in the heat for three months. They'll be calling all night, just for the sake of seeing something doing with a coherer again. They'll kai-tow to a coal-tug, just to pick up a scrap of outside news."

The stranger, who seemed well satisfied with what he had learned, remained silent for a moment or two.

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"By the way, could you take a message for New Orleans to-night?"

"I could take it all right, if you're willing to prepay land charges."

"I'll pay anything you say, so long as you get me in touch with my people there. I want to ask Jean Careche, at the St. Charles, just when a shipment of oil and mill shafting got out of that port."

"Wait a minute, then, until I get Atlantic City again. You can be writing out your message and I'll get the time-check on it."

McKinnon bent over his table, with a wrinkled brow, and started to "call." As he caught the lever-handle of the huge key in his fingers and worked it deliberately, yet slowly, up and down —he was sending "strong"—the sudden blue splash of flame exploded and leaped and hissed across the spark-gap, from one brass-knobbed discharging-rod to the other. It filled the roughly improvised station with a sound like the rattle of musketry. The ceiling and walls of the room, crusted with many paintings of white lead, mirrored and refracted the purplish-blue flashes. A faint ozonic odour, not unlike a subliminated smell of brimstone, filled the air.

The operator threw off his switch again and listened intently, with his two handkerchiefs

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muffling his earphones. Then he suddenly swung about and looked at the man behind him.

"That cruiser's going to Culebra, off Porto Rico. She's ordered south on account of the Locombian trouble."

"You don't mean she's going to mix up in that mess?" the intruder cried with a note of disgust.

"No; Atlantic City says she's just going to lie there and wait for instructions from Washington."

The operator turned back to his table without apparently noticing the interest in the other man's eyes. He sat seemingly detached and unconscious of any presence in the room except that of the mysterious spirit which came and went at a touch of his hand. A smile began to play about his mouth as he listened. It was held there in suspension, while his gaze shifted from side to side, vivaciously, in response to that far-off and mysterious voice that was winging its invisible way across so many miles of rain-washed sea and emptiness, to creep along a slender thread of metal into his closed and crowded cabin.

He still seemed unconscious of the mounting look of determination, of obdurate belligerency, that smouldered up into the square-jawed face of the watching stranger as his eyes travelled

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from a wall map of the Caribbean down to the brass key, and then back to the map again.

"You'd think our Uncle Samuel had enough troubles without trying to play school-teacher to those dinky little fire-eaters down there," he meditatively ventured as he took out another of his black Hondurian cigars, and once more fell to studying the map of the Caribbean.

The operator, bent low over his apparatus, did not deign to answer him.

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CHAPTER IV.

THE MAN ON BOARD

"You've made this trip before?" observed the stranger, studying the man before him with the same calm and half-closed eyes that he had bent on the faded wall-map. He seemed as strangely disturbed by his companion's note of quiet authority as he was by his incongruously sunburnt face and his unseemly length of limb.

"Never on *this* tub!" McKinnon responded, with a contemptuous side glance about his station.

The stranger followed that glance as it circled the crowded and disordered room. It was both a sleeping-cabin and an operating office. Under the wide shelf that supported a double row of Leyden jars, surmounted in turn by the De Forest helix, was the operator's narrow berth. Toward the foot of this berth, below the condenser, stood an enameled washbowl and a litter of tools. Next to these was a wooden-slatted trunk, on which lay a clutter of recently unpacked

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clothing, a pair of canvas-covered dumbbells, a shaving set, and a tin box of photographs. Against the farther wall, half way to the door, and directly in front of the dynamo, stood a broken steamer chair. In front of it was the rough pine table at which the operator sat and worked. On this table stood the tuning-box, with its mysterious rows of numerals along the three slots in which lever-heads moved back and forth, the great, long-handled despatching instrument, like a Brobdingnagian model of a telegraph key, and the delicately mounted little responder, the nerve center of the wireless system. Above this, on the outside wall, stood the switchboard. It was of unpainted pine, like the table. Set in it, near the top, was the starting-box, with its broken and roughly spliced lever, and below it the switch-arm itself, standing between its two protecting fuses. At the end of the table was the faded wall-map of the Caribbean and a shallow clothes-locker. Above this was tacked a lithograph of a stage dancer, pointing with a pink-satined toe to other and brighter worlds. It was a strange medley of the obvious and the inscrutable, of the commonplace and the mysterious.

"How'd you get aboard this tub, anyway?" the stranger suddenly asked, with a sympathetic wag of the head.

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"I needed the money. But I never thought I'd have to face a mess like this." And the new operator disgustedly waved an arm about the room.

The stranger was meditatively rubbing his pendulous chin.

"You don't like the work, eh?"

"It's good enough when you've got a decent station. But *this* room isn't fit for a pig to live in! Look at that box of a sleeping-berth! It's worse than a coffin! And I'm going to kick a board out of that cabin wall if they don't get a ventilator tube in here—it's like sleeping in a dough-box! And look at that bunged-up tuner! And that operating-table, that's never seen a coat of paint; and that switchboard—nothing but raw pine! Why, nine of the connecters in those Leyden jars turned out to be broken, after I'd struck this place at noon. I had to patch them up with all the washbowl chains from the first cabins as we came down the bay. I got on to *that* dodge aboard the *Prinz Joachim.*"

"*She's* a real boat!" interpolated the stranger.

The young operator was wistfully nodding his head. "They carry a German band, and an ice machine, and free beer for the officers."

"But you can make this snug enough," the other soothed.

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"Snug! Why, this place looked like a box stall in a livery stable. I haven't even got a silence-room or an annunciator connecting me with the bridge—I've got to be hollered at like a sinker cook in an East Side beanery!"

The stranger laughed. It was altogether a laugh of sympathy. But his meditative eye kept roving about the stateroom.

"I suppose you've seen a good deal of the South?" he said at last.

"All I want to, thank you!" promptly answered McKinnon. The vigour of his retort made the other man smile again.

"You don't like it down there, eh?"

The operator, who had slowly adjusted his caplike receiving apparatus, performed his habitual rite of lifting the 'phone-receiver from his ear to catch the question as it was repeated.

"Do *you?*" demanded the operator.

The stranger did not answer the question. Instead of that he asked another.

"Why don't you keep out of it, then?" There was nothing, apparently, but off-handed good-nature in the query. The operator laughed.

"I can't afford to," was all he said, though he added in an afterthought: "Until I can get at the work I want."

McKinnon's questioner looked relieved. He

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became more light-hearted, more suavely consolatory.

"But it's so deucedly mysterious—sending all kinds of messages for all kinds of people," he argued.

"What's so mysterious about it?" the man at the table demanded. "*I* think it's confoundedly simple."

"The machinery is, I suppose, when you understand it; but I mean the mixing up in the big events, the getting next to life with the shell off."

"Oh, it's mostly weather reports and 'sweetheart' messages and captains giving distances and saying they're coming into port or passing lights or wanting wharf room, if it isn't the Navy people asking for Sunday papers and news from home."

"But think what a swath you could cut with wireless if you wanted to," pursued the other in his placid disregard of all side issues.

"Me?" said McKinnon, turning slowly about.

"I mean as a side line," interposed the stranger with a shrug. Still again McKinnon's nervous grey eyes swept the figure in the steamer-chair.

"But I *have* a side line," explained the operator as he noted the other man's puzzled gaze resting on his box of models.

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"How d'you mean?"

"I mean that reed-disk and Ruhmkorff coil transmitter you see there. *That's* the work I want to get at."

"But what is it?" was the other's half-diffident inquiry. His lack of interest in no way seemed to depress the younger man.

"It's my wireless telephony scheme for pilot-boats and fleet manœuvres and yacht races and ten-mile work in general. For instance, there's a battle going on, and the whole top hamper of a cruiser gets blown away; all we'd have to do, with this, would be to run a wire up on an oar and call on the flagship for orders."

"But aren't other folks for getting in ahead of you on this?"

"Well, I can still use my outfit to smash their monopoly and stop royalty overcharges. You see, it's only an arrangement of steel reeds connected with a receiver, or say to a responder like this one on the table. These reeds are tuned in unison with the transmitter-reeds—it works on what we call the law of syntonic synchronism."

He noticed, as he went on, the other's companionable grimace at the polysyllables.

"But this is all Greek to you," he said, with a shoulder movement of humorous resignation.

"No, it ain't," protested the other. "Go on."

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"Models cost money, of course," McKinnon continued more deliberately. "I have to go slow. But once I get that apparatus where I want it you'll never see *me* south of Hatteras again."

He stopped, and waited for the other man to speak.

"It's not a white man's country," admitted the stranger with a nod toward the South. "The only good thing in it's the mules."

"We've got to take that as it comes," McKinnon said with an unlooked-for placidity of tone. Then he leaned back, with half-closed eyes, and linked his long forefingers together behind his head. "You see, I can always save money on a coastwise run like this: there's no way of getting rid of it."

"Well, money's worth having now and then," the stranger remarked as his sagely ruminative eye fell on the little varnished box that held the wireless responder.

He was silent for a moment or two, though McKinnon watched him closely out of his half-shut eyes. Then the stranger swung slowly about and touched the operator on his soiled shirt-sleeve. McKinnon felt the heavy forefinger on his arm, but he did not move.

"See here," said the stranger, and both his voice and his expression had undergone some

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quick and pregnant change, "see here; d'you want to make ten times what you get out of this key-operating business? D'you want to make a good round sum, helping me out of a hole?"

The *Laminian's* operator looked closely at the man who had invaded his cabin. He had apparently been afraid of some such undercurrent of self-interest in the other's advances. He seemed to possess the man of thought's persistent horror of material and entangling alliances; he seemed to feel that some secret web of inveiglement had been woven about him.

"How could *I* help you out of a hole?" he curtly demanded.

The stranger did not answer at once. The other's suddenly aroused suspicion had warned him to go slow. Instead of speaking he leaned back in the steamer-chair and studied his companion. The path before him seemed a precarious one. His pursed-up lips worked slowly in and out as he sat there temporising. There was something suggestive of the ruminant in his large and heavy silence.

"Could we talk here—us two, man to man?" he finally asked, with a look at the door.

"Of course we can," the operator retorted, nettled by the sense of mystery the other was conjuring up about so simple a situation. This

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vague feeling of irritation seemed to merge into something that was almost anger as he watched the stranger slowly rise to his feet and cross over to the cabin door, held back against the wall-plates by its brass hook. He lifted the end of this hook on his toe and let the freed door swing shut with the slow dip of the steamer's deck. Then he ruffled out the faded denim curtain and came back and sat down. The two men continued to look at each other guardedly.

"I've got a hard job ahead of me," began the intruder, seeming to feel his way as he went. "A hard job—and you're the only man on this ship who can help me along."

"Go on," McKinnon commanded with an impatient reach for his discarded coat.

"That's just it. I'll be hanged if I know how to go on!" the other explained. He gave vent to a guttural laugh of uneasiness and sat stroking his pendulous, turkey-cock throat.

The operator, drumming on his pine table-edge, waited in silence. The other man was also silent. The pulse and throb of the engines crept into the white-walled cabin.

"Well," said McKinnon with a significant glance toward his large and authoritative silver watch. The stranger's eye, following him, passed on to the key-lever and then on again to the helix wires.

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"You may recall that you sent a couple of messages out for me this afternoon," he finally began.

McKinnon recalled the fact of the two despatches.

"Maybe you happen to remember the wording of those two particular messages?"

McKinnon, with wrinkled brow, turned to his "send-hook." He found the two sheets, and straightened them out on his knee. Then he looked up to say: "We never hold these things in our head, you know. We can't, any more than a wire can."

He let his gaze run over the sheets of paper before him. The other man sat watching him as he read. For just a moment, as he made note of what seemed the operator's half-forbearing, half-cynical indifference, a shadow of disappointment flitted across his face, typifying, apparently, some passing regret for a reconnaissance at last recognised as unnecessary. But he pulled himself together at once, as though determined to face the problem immediately before him.

"Would you mind reading that first despatch out to me?" he asked with the placid authority of a prestidigitateur sure of his trick.

McKinnon rattled through the message at a breath: "Varrel, sixty Wall Street, New York.

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Our man on board *Laminian*, bound Puerto Locombia. Wire Washington. Will have him held by authorities to await instructions. DUFFY."

The operator put the message on the table and calmly weighted it with his carborundum box. The other man suddenly realised, as he made note of McKinnon's attitude of unmoved neutrality, how automatic the human mind can become; how, when once immersed in the method of doing a thing, it can lose all sense of the thing itself. The man of the key had seen nothing but a string of words to be "sent." It was only too apparent that their meaning had escaped him.

"I suppose I've got to explain that," said the stranger, fondling one of his thick, short cigars in his thick, short fingers. "You'll notice that this message went to 60 Wall Street. You may or may not know that that's the Information Bureau of the Consolidated Fruit Concern. And if you've knocked about the Banana Belt long enough you've found out that those people just about *own* those little yam-eating republics down there."

McKinnon nodded as a sign that he understood.

"They've got a good many millions of money locked up in that export business o' theirs. And

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when you're doing business in a republic that's built on bullets you've got to watch where you're walking. It means that you've got to keep your ear to the ground; see that your governments are stable, I mean; and your marionettes in their nice little red and gold uniforms running smooth and true. That's why they retain a big man like Varrel for their information bureau—just to know who's poking a finger into the political pie down there, and to be ready for trouble when it blows up."

It was all obvious enough to the listening operator.

"Well, I'm here acting for Varrel and the Consolidated Fruit people. The Locombian *charge d'affaires* at Washington tipped our office off some five weeks ago about trouble ahead in Guariqui."

"Where's Guariqui?" quietly asked McKinnon.

"Guariqui's their capital—the capital of Locombia. Since we've heard that, of course, we've been co-operating with the department at Washington, keeping an eye on any Locombian likely to be interested in the Guariqui mix-up."

McKinnon confessed that he had known of detectives engaged in the sole pursuit of shadowing Latin-American exiles.

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"And it's right here under this deck"—Duffy tapped the floor with his heel as he spoke—"*it's right here on this ship o' yours that we've got Ganley—the one and only Ganley!*"

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CHAPTER V

THE WEB OF INTRIGUE

The stranger peered across the cabin at the unperturbed operator.

"Who's Ganley?" asked McKinnon.

The man in the steamer-chair let his astonishment explode in a ceilingward belch of smoke.

"Ganley! Why, Ganley's the biggest gun-runner doing business in the Caribbean!"

"Gun-runner?"

"Yes, the slickest revolution-maker that ever shipped carbines and smokeless into a Latin-American republic!"

"He's new to me," McKinnon protested.

"He's the man who's always smelling out a country that's looking for a liberator. And he gets a rake-off from the patriots and a rake-off from the Birmingham gun people, and another rake-off from the nitro-makers. Why, he's the man who's been engineering this Locombian uprising for the last seven months! But now

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we've got him good, and got him where we want him."

"Then what's he doing on a steamer like this? Couldn't he see he was going to be cornered?"

The disposition of the operator was not altogether an inflammable one.

"That's just the point, my friend. He couldn't get out of Charleston or Mobile or New Orleans. We had those ports watched. So he slipped quietly up to New York, engaged a passage on Saturday's Hamburg-American steamer for Colon, and then slipped over to the *Laminian* in a closed cab when he thought we weren't keeping tab on him. But, pshaw! you know all this already, don't you?"

"Not all of it," replied McKinnon.

"But you saw that yellow-skinned man who was helped aboard? The sick-looking fellow with the Spanish servant, who was almost carried up from that cab on the wharf?"

McKinnon confessed to some vague remembrance of the incident.

"That man is Ganley!" said the other. "And he's under this deck, down there in cabin fourteen, and you'll find that he's going to stay there until we slip into the roadstead at Puerto Locombia."

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A meditative silence filled the little white-walled cabin.

"But what have I got to do with all this?" McKinnon at last demanded. His face seemed to carry the complaint that he had always found dissension on shipboard hard to endure; it was never easy to get away from disturbances in a world so small, or to put hate behind one in a life so circumscribed. Yet he smiled a little, in spite of himself. A ship, he had somewhere heard, must be either a heaven or a hell. The next fortnight, he felt, would find little of the celestial about the *Laminian*.

"That's just what I'm coming around to," the intruder was saying to him. "This Ganley, remember, has got his 'fences' and confederates and small-fry helpers. He works the thing thorough when he does it. And as likely as not, between here and Puerto Locombia, he's going to get messages sent in to him, or he's going to send out some despatches on his own hook—so as to keep in touch with his people."

The stranger came to a stop and sat regarding the younger man as though he looked for some word of encouragement or comprehension from him.

"The thing I've got to guard against most," the stranger who called himself Duffy continued, "is the department at Washington. If

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they sent something in, and it got out all over the ship, it would be likely to spoil everything."

"But it won't get out all over the ship," the operator corrected.

"You'll promise me that?" asked the other with a look of relief.

"Of course I'll promise you that—it's part of my business."

"But there's the other side of the question," the stranger discreetly continued. "Ganley is almost sure to be sending or receiving something. Why, I shouldn't be surprised if you've been handling something for him already."

The operator reached out for his message-hooks. The movement was merely perfunctory, for the hooks were all but empty.

"What name would he be travelling under?" McKinnon looked up to ask.

"He's booked as John Siebert, cabin fourteen," was the answer.

The man in the steamer-chair looked relieved, but only for a moment, when he learned that nothing had come or gone.

"Of course I may be wrong about his trying to keep in touch with those people of his. And it may happen the department won't even try to have him held. Perhaps they won't do anything until we get him ashore at Puerto Locombia. But we've got to get him there—it's our

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last chance. We've worked too hard on this thing not to see it put through to a finish."

"And?" asked McKinnon, waiting.

"All I want you to do is to keep tab on anything that comes in for this man Ganley, or about him and his tin-horn warfare down there—and on anything that's to go out, until we land."

"Are you acting officially?" McKinnon demanded, with a studied effort towards impersonality. "I mean, are you acting for the department at Washington?"

"I'm acting as the confidential agent of the Consolidated Fruit people, and the Consolidated Fruit people have been co-operating with the department for several weeks now."

"And you simply want to know what these messages are?"

"Yes, that's all; I mean that's all, unless they're of such a nature as to defeat the ends of justice. We don't want anything to get through that's going to help our man slip away from us."

"You mean for me to hold back everything that looks suspicious until you O.K. it?"

"And couldn't you do that if I made it worth while for you?" quietly inquired the stranger.

"How do you mean worth while?"

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"Why, I'll pay you for your trouble. I'll——"

But McKinnon's seemingly indignant start brought the older man to a stop.

"You don't suppose I'm going to take money to hold up the company's business?" he demanded.

The stranger raised a thick, red hand protestingly. McKinnon noticed a scar in the centre of the wide palm. He inappositely wondered if it could be a bullet wound.

"Hold on a minute!" he warned the other, appeasingly. "This isn't a matter o' messenger-boy tips. It's out and out business. You've got to remember they're big things involved in this, and big people, too."

"Why do you want to mix *me* up in the mess, whether it's big or little?" complained the operator. The other man permitted the protest to go unanswered.

"But can't you tell me what it's worth for you to co-operate with us in this?" he blandly insisted.

"It would be worth my job!" McKinnon cried. The other man, eyeing him closely, could not rid himself of the impression that the operator was acting a part, that he was feigning reluctance for some potentially better bargain yet to be driven.

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"Well, what's your job worth?" was the older man's undisturbed query. In fact, there was an undertone of contempt in his guttural question.

"Oh, it's not what the job's worth," protested McKinnon. "It's the putting outside business before the business I'm paid to do. It's the acting against regulations and getting the company officers down on me. It's the doing of something I'm not here to do."

"But this is merely a matter between us two, man to man. The company doesn't have anything to do with this."

"They own this junk," broke out the operator, with a wave of the hand that designated the apparatus about him. "And they about own me, too, as long as I'm on their pay-roll."

"Of course they do," the other soothed tranquilly. "But you're here, and they're in New York, and you've got the running of this apparatus until we dock at Puerto Locombia."

The operator sat looking at the other man in silence.

"Why, you told me yourself, a few minutes ago, that your machinery doesn't always work right. And you say you haven't a tape, or anything that registers the messages as they come to you. Isn't that right?"

The operator nodded.

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"Then why couldn't you accidentally miss a message? Or why couldn't you send it out without being sure that it was going to carry clear across to the next operator?"

McKinnon still looked at the other man. There was something so placid and intimate about the tones of the stranger's voice that the very purport of his suggestion had seemed robbed of its enormity.

"I wouldn't do a thing like that for five hundred dollars!" the operator at last declared.

The stranger looked back at him without a move of his great body in the steamer-chair. McKinnon's glance of open contempt in nowise disturbed him.

"I'll give you one thousand dollars if you do it!" he said. His voice was quiet and casual as he spoke, but again the operator swung about and peered at him. He opened his lips to reply, and then suddenly became silent. He shifted in his chair, as though to draw away from some tangible and precipitating temptation.

"I'll give you one thousand dollars," repeated the stranger, "and I'll promise to stand between you and any trouble you're afraid of."

"It's not what I'm afraid of," the other retorted.

"Then what is it? You fail to catch a message or two, and no one's the wiser. What of

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that? Good heavens, man, you're not doing anything crooked! Nobody's cut a throat back there in New York! Nobody's trying to get away from your Centre Street people. You're not doing anything against the penal code."

"Why didn't you go to the captain about this?" complained the operator. The tacit note of concession in that complaint did not escape his companion.

"That low-brow!" he grunted in disgust.

"Being a low-brow, as you call him, ought to make him all the easier to handle," suggested McKinnon, with his short and puzzling laugh. "And he's still the master of the ship."

"The captain has no more to do with this than De Forest himself! And I imagine he'd rather be soaking in brandy pawnees than talking business to outsiders. This is something between us two. You're not cheating anybody. You're not hurting anybody. All you do is to help me win a big case, and get well paid for your trouble. And a twist of the wrist is what it costs you. For I'm assuming, of course, you can put that machinery of yours out of business for the time being without exactly showing how."

"That's easy enough," said the operator, with a stare at his apparatus. "There are a dozen ways of throwing a complicated thing like

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that out of kilter. It's my getting out of kilter with the company that worries me."

"The company doesn't count, my friend. They're outsiders in this. And you get your thousand dollars in cold cash, to work on that reed-disk of yours for half a year, if you want to."

McKinnon laughed a little. Then he grew more thoughtful, and was about to speak, when the quick tread of feet sounded on the deck without. He caught up the 'phone "set" hurriedly and bent over the pine table. The steps passed on, but the betrayal of disingenuousness remained a consoling and obvious fact to the man in the steamer-chair. It left him no longer in doubt.

He reached down into his capacious trouser pocket and produced a roll of treasury notes, held together by a double rubber band. He peeled off three orange-tinted twenty-dollar bills and folded them neatly across the middle, lengthwise. Then, with equal deliberation, he thrust them into McKinnon's still hesitating fingers. The operator looked down at the money doubtfully and then up at the stranger.

"That's just a trio of twenties to bind the bargain," the latter explained. "You've got to get *something* for me taking up your time like this."

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"But how are you going to clear me—I mean how are you going to make them see I haven't been acting against the ship, if it ever comes to a showdown?" asked the operator, not so much with timidity, but more as though he took a morbid joy in toying with the dangers of the situation.

"There'll be nothing to clear, and nothing to show," the other retorted. "All you've got to do is to have a bad ear when a certain message or two happens along. But I'll go further than that just to put your mind at rest. To-morrow, when I pay over the balance, I'll put it down on paper, with my name to it, that I guarantee to protect you. We can both sign a note showing we're acting straight and where we stand. Then you'll have me tied down in black and white. That seems square enough, doesn't it?"

"Oh, it's square enough. But suppose this man Ganley comes to me with a message to send out. I've got to show it to you, and if you don't approve of it I've got to act the lie that the message has been sent and keep lying to him every time he asks me about it."

"You're not paid to be a 'fence' for a gunrunner, are you?"

The older man laughed a little. Then he rose heavily to his feet. His head almost touched the cabin ceiling. "There's not much danger

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he'll ever ask about it. And when you know the man and his business you'll never let things like that worry you."

"That doesn't excuse me—his being a gun-runner."

"Well, if you felt that way, of course, you could send the message. Only you might send it as I mentioned—with the risk of falling short, I mean; some time when the engine-room doesn't happen to be giving you quite enough power."

The operator weighed and pondered the question. The man beside him was anarchistic enough in his ideals of conduct. He recognised no authority beyond the dictates of expediency. He went back to primal and feral conditions—went back to them with the disquieting directness of a savage.

"I'd have to call until I got my station," temporised the operator, "and the other fellow's O.K. after he'd got my call. Then he'd signal 'Go ahead,' to show he was ready to receive, and if I failed to reach him he'd keep 'coming back' for me to repeat. Then, too, what I was trying to send might be picked up by any stray operator behind the skyline. On the other hand, if I let the message die, after getting my 'go-ahead' signal, the thing would be reported

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and looked into. And that would mean trouble with the company when I got back."

"Then when you get your 'go-ahead' signal why couldn't you just lay low and complain that your receiver or coherer, or something, was out of order—that you were cut off from receiving?"

"I hate to lie about my machinery," retorted the operator with what seemed a blind and foolish pride in his tools.

The older man's curl of lip showed a slowly mounting dislike for further argument. Then he lifted his wide shoulders with a movement of resignation.

"Of course, I don't want you to lose either your job or your self-respect just because my official duty's been making me shadow a man."

The wireless operator seemed groping about for an answer when the quietness of the ship was broken by a sudden sound. It was the *Laminian's* foghorn, hoarse and mournful through the darkness, tearing the quiet with its slowly repeated call. The two men stood side by side, listening, as the bass-noted complaint was repeated.

"We're running into thick weather," said the operator, turning to take up his earphones. The two men, immured in their own ends and aims, had lost all thought of time and environment.

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A moment later heavy footsteps sounded on the deck and the captain appeared in the doorway. He stood in the narrow opening, red-nosed, gnome-like, with the white light glistening on his waterproofed figure.

"Are you keeping an ear open for everything in there?" he demanded, with a scowl of disapproval at the man beside the steamer-chair.

"I'm listening for anything," McKinnon answered, with the "set" over his head. The door shut again. McKinnon turned back to the littered pine table. The foghorn sounded and grew silent; the dynamo purred and buzzed as the starting-box lever crossed down on the contact-pins.

The stranger beside the steamer-chair buttoned his coat. Then he crossed the cabin and turned back to peer at the operator, bent low over his table as he called and listened, and called again.

"So I can count on you in this?" he asked in his quiet and reassuring guttural. His hand was already on the cabin door-knob.

"To the finish," answered the other man pregnantly, replacing his earphones and holding them close to his head with his muffling handkerchiefs.

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CHAPTER VI

THE SECOND VISITOR

McKinnon was oppressed by the thought that the hour was late and his body bone-tired. But he did not close communication with the *Royal Mail* operator who had "picked him up" through the fog until he had been duly warned of heavy weather southeast of Hatteras. Through the night came also the news that one of the *Royal Mail* passengers, an American consul from Aregua, had broken his thigh-bone against a bulkhead, and the *Laminian* was asked to relay the news to New York. This meant a call for ambulance and doctors to be at the landing-wharf, together with an order to have a hospital-room made ready.

So the key was kept busy again while the beneficent resources of science were being marshalled so many miles away. The *Laminian's* operator had bidden his far-off fellow worker a sleepy "good-night," and was still stooping absently over his tuning-box—which had not

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adapted itself to the thick-weather work—when a knock sounded on his cabin door.

"Come in!" he said, lifting off his earphones with a little sigh of mingled weariness and resignation. He suspected that his undisclosed caller was a junior officer, much given to garrulity. He began to dread the thought of being kept out of bed for another hour or two.

The door opened slowly and the look of frank annoyance as slowly faded from the operator's face, for standing there, confronting him, blinking in the strong glare of his electrics, was a young woman.

Her skirts, gathered up in one hand, and held high from the wet deck, showed in a sweeping cascade of white against the gloom behind them. On her head was a blue seagoing cap, swathed in a long, cream-coloured motor-veil. Behind her stood a stewardess, fat and untidy, carrying a cloak, with the outward and studious solicitude of a servile nature exalted by the consciousness of having been overtipped. She would have made an ideal figure, the operator felt, for the nurse of the Capulets.

McKinnon put down his 'phone and rose from his seat, still peering at the figure nearer him, the woman in the doorway. He looked at her closely, perhaps too closely, for he had not imagined any such woman aboard the *Laminian*.

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He noticed that she was wearing a gown of dark-blue pilot-cloth, and that she was younger than he had at first supposed. One of her hands had been thrown out to the door-jamb to steady her against the roll and pitch of the deck. The clear oval of her face—and it seemed more the mature and thoughtful face of a woman than the timid and hesitating face of a girl—was shadowed and softened by a crowning mass of brown hair. Her teeth, as she ventured her sober yet oddly conciliating smile, impressed him as being very white and regular, vaguely hinting at a bodily strength which the softness of her eyes, at a first glance, seemed to contradict. Yet these deep-lashed eyes were alert and alive with the fires of intelligence, and set wide apart under the low and thoughtful brow. They carried an inalienable sense of wisdom in their almost austere steadiness of outlook, McKinnon felt, as the woman still stood in the doorway, puckering her face a little at the strong light. Yet what most impressed him was the sense of ebullient vigour, of intrepid and Aprilian vitality, which brooded about her. She was by no means Amazonian in stature—she was even smaller than he had at first suspected—but she gave him the impression of being youthfully and buoyantly full-blooded.

Then she stepped boldly in across the high

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door-sill and held out a tinted form-pad sheet to the operator. The solicitously purring stewardess, at a gesture from her benefactor, had already disappeared.

"You are still sending, are you not?" asked the young woman, stepping still nearer the operating-table.

Her voice betrayed no trace of foreign origin, as McKinnon had at first expected it might. The speech was that of a well-groomed New York girl, the type of girl that McKinnon had so often noted about the Fifth Avenue shops and the theatre lobbies. The voice was the New York voice, yet with a difference. It was the slightest and thinnest substratum of accent, of modulation, that made up this difference. Yet in doing so it imparted to her words a mild and bewitching gentleness of tone that seemed to hint at some indefinably exotic influence of education or environment. It seemed to impart to her the crisp piquancy of the Parisian, persistently yet mysteriously accounting for her birdlike alertness of poise and movement, for some continuous suggestion of schoolgirl youthfulness that belied her actual years. It seemed to convert what he had at first accepted as audacity into fortitude touched with discretion.

"Then you *are* sending," she said, as though in answer to her own question.

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"I'm sorry," said McKinnon, backing away from the chair that she might take it if she chose. "I'm sorry, but I've just stopped for the night."

For the first time he was conscious of the fact that he had been at work in his shirt-sleeves, and that these sleeves were wofully soiled. He took down his coat and struggled into it. The young woman noticed the movement gratefully and sank into the chair he had abandoned for her.

"But can you not get somebody?" she asked. There was no note of pleading.in her voice, but the mute appeal of her eyes as they rested on his made him suddenly change his mind.

"I've been having trouble with that tuner of mine," he explained. "It's rather hard for us to pick up anything on a thick night like this, you know. But I'll try."

She bent a little to one side as he leaned over the table and threw down the switch-lever. They were side by side, almost touching each other.

"Why is it hard?" she asked.

"It's not easy to explain without being technical, but wireless works 'heavy' in damp weather. You may have noticed it with telephones, even, on rainy days."

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"Yes, I have," she said with a preoccupied nod, turning her gaze from the switch-lever to McKinnon's face.

He caught the key in his fingers and the blue spark once more leaped and exploded across the spark-gap. The girl watched him with intent eyes and slightly parted lips as he fitted the "set" to his head and listened with the 'phones pressed against his ears.

McKinnon was keenly conscious of her presence there so close beside him. There was something perversely and insidiously exhilarating in it. It made him forget the hour and the fact that he was bone-tired. The orderlylike stewardess fluttering about, he supposed, somewhere beyond the closed door, alone took the romance out of a visit so deliberately secret. He turned to his key again, and again called through the night. Then he adjusted his 'phones and listened. He finally put down his "set," with a shake of the head.

"I'm afraid we'll have to wait until morning," he said.

"I'm sorry," she answered, with her studious eyes on the dancing-girl lithograph above the faded wall-map.

"If you'll leave the message, I'll file it," McKinnon explained, to hide his resentment at the

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half-derisive touch that had crept into her glance.

The woman handed him the message-form, with her intent eyes now on his.

"Must I pay now?" she asked.

"It will be charged against your stateroom; the purser will collect it before you land," explained the operator as he jabbed the message on his send-hook with a businesslike sweep of the hand.

"But you will see that it's sent?" she asked as she rose to her feet.

"It will be off before you're up," McKinnon answered, watching her as she drew the heavy folds of her veil close down over her face. She looked back, at the door, with a timidly audacious nod of the head. The next moment the door closed and she was gone.

McKinnon, still conscious of the subtle fragrance that filled the room, swung about to his table. He paused only a second to wonder a little at this faint but persistent perfume that seemed to have charged and changed the very atmosphere about him. Then he crossed the cabin and reached up and ripped a brightly coloured lithograph from the wall, bisecting the terpsichorean figure with one impatient tear of the paper.

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He stood in the middle of the room for a moment or two without moving. Then he crossed to his table, reached out to the send-hook, and quickly unspeared the message.

He looked at it for several moments. Then he passed his hands over his tired eyes and reread the words. They were addressed to Enrique Luis Carbo, Locombian Consulate, New Orleans, and they said:

Am on board *Laminian*, bound from New York to Puerto Locombia. Advise necessary quarters. ALICIA BOYNTON.

McKinnon was still peering down at the message in his hand when he was startled by the sound of someone at his door. Even before he could restore the message to the hook his door was opened and as quickly closed again.

It was the girl who had just left him. He noticed that she held one hand on her breast and that she was panting. She leaned against the jamb for a minute or two, as though weak from fright.

"What is it?" the operator asked.

"Oh, it's nothing," she faltered, struggling bravely enough to regain her composure. Her answer was not altogether convincing.

"What has happened?" persisted the startled operator.

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She moved away from the door, in a listening attitude.

"It was a man," she tried to explain, inadequately. "He frightened me."

"But what man?"

"A stranger—somebody outside."

"You mean that he dared to speak to you?"

There was a moment's silence.

"No," she answered in her low voice. "But it was the shock of seeing him so—so unexpectedly."

McKinnon stepped across the cabin and stood near her. His efforts to catch some clearer glimpse of the veiled face were fruitless. She reminded him of a ruffled bird.

"Won't you sit down until you feel better?"

"No, no! I must go! It's so late! I *must* go!"

But she still hesitated.

"Shall I take you to your cabin?" he ventured.

She showed actual alarm at this.

"Oh, no; that is out of the question. But if you will turn down your lights until I have slipped away——"

He snapped out the electrics. He could hear her in the darkness quietly opening the door. She stood there looking out for several moments. "Good-night," she whispered grate-

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fully as she slipped across the deck and was gone.

McKinnon stood looking after her, deep in thought.

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CHAPTER VII

THE TANGLING SKEIN

It was early the next morning that the *Laminian* ran into a coastwise gale that left her decks clear of passengers and her funnels white with salt. The intermittent crackle of "static" from the humming aerials kept obliterating the etheric "splash" of the *Laminian's* low-powered coils. The ship was left inarticulate and alone on her course. Beyond the erratic "sneeze" and "cough" of the atmospheric electricity there was no answering voice within McKinnon's sternly delimited radius of communication.

The weather disturbed McKinnon much less than did his own state of mind. The day, which was one of brain-fogging pitching and tossing about his cabin, left everything connected with the night before still in suspense. The ship seemed a deserted one. Captain Yandel and his officers sat alone before the "racks" of the musty-odoured tables, between musty-odoured

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walls that outraged the nostrils like the effluvial dampness of a nighthawk's cab. No one ventured on deck.

McKinnon, during that enforced armistice, escaped a day of total inaction by packing away his belongings. That task accomplished, he overhauled his helix and drafted a casing for his dynamo. As the afternoon deepened into evening, and the wind fell, he coerced his attention on his Ruhmkorff-coil models. He was still studying over his reed-disk apparatus when an unexpected tap sounded on his door.

Even before he had time to answer, the door itself was opened. It was the girl in the pilot-cloth gown, his visitor of the night before. She looked back one intent moment, as though to make sure she was not being watched or followed. Then she quietly closed the door and as quietly slid the brass bolt that stood under the knob, locking herself in the cabin.

She smiled, a little nervously and yet spiritedly, as she caught sight of the other's concerned and puzzled face. Then her own face became quite sober. Again McKinnon was conscious of a faint perfume pervading the place. It seemed as finely feminine to him as the rustling of skirts. And again he was impressed by the ebullient sense of buoyancy, of youthful

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vigour, which persisted about her, even in shadow, like a penumbra.

"Could I speak to you?" she asked, a little disturbed at the other's continued silence. "I have something to explain," she continued, "something in which you might help me."

The flow of her English seemed as even and liquid as the flow of a river, yet there still remained that puzzling and piquant undercurrent of the exotic.

"You do not mind?" she asked, obviously puzzled by his continued aloofness. It was plain that she was not a woman who frequently asked favours of men.

"Of course I don't mind! It's only that a visit like this might be misconstrued——"

She shrugged her shoulders ambiguously and sank into the steamer-chair. McKinnon discreetly slid back the shutter of his cabin window. He took the further precaution of drawing the faded denim curtain. The woman watched the operation with her mild and meditative gaze still on the figure before her. Then she motioned for him to sit down. She noticed his eyes on the door, apparently in apprehension, and she smiled a little. Then she became serious again and peered studiously about the room.

"You could put me in there?" she suggested,

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with a satiric motion towards the operator's closet-door.

McKinnon seemingly took her query in good faith, for he threw open the door and peered inside. His troubled look returned to him.

"There would scarcely be room," he explained. "It's so crowded and shallow, you see."

"It would be an adventure," she maintained, making due allowance for his lack of humour. He could see that she was wringing some inapposite amusement out of the situation. It threw him on his guard for a moment, but only for a moment. The open candour of her glance disarmed his abashed suspicion.

He agreed with her that it would indeed be an adventure. He even laughed at the thought of it, infected a little by her spirit of quiet audacity. Yet, in spite of himself, as he let his eyes rest on hers, there remained with him the stubborn yet vague impression that her presence there was the preamble for some deeper and undivulged purpose. The seconds lengthened themselves into a minute, and still neither spoke. They were still gazing at each other when the sound of a quick step on the deck without fell on their ears.

The woman stood up with a little gasp. The look on her face changed into one of appeal. Mc-

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Kinnon, impressed with her fear, also rose to his feet. They could hear the locked cabin door being impatiently shaken.

"What shall I do?" whispered the woman. The operator pointed towards his clothes-closet. It was the only resource. He motioned for her to step into it as he himself crossed the cabin towards the outer door, on which someone was now openly and impatiently knocking.

There was a fleeting rustle of drapery, a warning pressure of one slender finger against the woman's lips, and a moment later she had disappeared into her place of hiding and had swung back the door. McKinnon, as soon as he saw she was safe, withdrew his bolt. In the frame of light stood the great, wide-shouldered figure of Duffy. He waited there, without advancing, for several seconds. McKinnon could see his slowly roving eye as it took in each detail of the stateroom. He betrayed no surprise and no curiosity, but across his face flitted a veiled look of apprehension.

"Are you alone?" he asked.

McKinnon nodded.

"Busy?" he next demanded.

The single word bristled with something more than interrogation. But McKinnon felt that he was not in a position to resent it. He stooped

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over the last of his wireless models and lifted the box back against the closet door.

"I am packing away my stuff for the night," he answered as he turned back to his operating-table and caught up his earphones. His action in doing so was simply a rite of repudiation. The gesture was not lost on the other man.

"I guess you're busy to-night," he said; "I won't take up your time. All I wanted was to close up that agreement of ours."

He reached into his pocket and drew out his roll of bills placidly, with the businesslike unconcern of a man contemptuous of small transactions. He counted off nine hundred and forty dollars, folded them together, and flung them on the pine table. McKinnon, all the while, was thinking of the half-shut closet door.

"That puts us even, doesn't it?" Duffy said, backing away a little. His movement brought him nearer to the ever-menacing door.

McKinnon was not in a state to argue it out with him. His strangely self-frustrating wish was still to cry everything off. But he was afraid of some second complication. And he had his own reasons why these should not arise.

"Yes, that makes us even," he admitted, suddenly remembering he had a witness to the strange business in hand. The intruder stepped back to the table again.

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"Then we'll both sign this slip of paper, so we'll know where we stand," he suggested.

After Duffy had ponderously signed his name with a heavy, gold-banded fountain-pen, the operator took his place. The paper seemed nothing more than a receipt, yet something about its wording was repugnant to him. He did not take time to analyse his feeling; he was too oppressed by the thought of the woman and the near-by door. He ventured one half-hearted objection, however, as Duffy thrust the pen in his hand.

"I can't say I altogether like this," he complained.

"Why not?"

McKinnon forced a laugh.

"It sounds like an army commission."

"Where d'you want it changed?" Duffy demanded as he fell to pacing the cabin. His wandering threw McKinnon into a sudden panic.

"It's not the wording—it's the signing of a thing like this."

"Of course it is," the other agreed, mild and indulging, as a doctor might be with a peevish and restless patient. "But weren't you saying you wanted to make this every-day work of yours a little more romantic?"

He had stopped in front of the closet door

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and was apparently studying the faded map of the Caribbean. The position was perilous.

"Where do I sign?" demanded McKinnon, bringing the other man back to his side at the table.

The ink was scarcely dry on the paper before a change crept into Duffy's manner. He seemed more sure of himself, more conscious of mastery over an ally, who, if a reluctant one, was still an ally.

He folded the receipt and dropped it into his leather wallet. Then he placed the wallet in his breast pocket; his movements were always ponderous and deliberative.

"Remember, this means a devil of a lot to me. I'll have to depend on you to do the right thing when the time comes."

"It's not that bad, is it?" the operator asked, still with an effort at humour.

"It may be as bad as either of us could imagine," Duffy retorted.

"If that's the way it's shaping I'd better draw out of it."

McKinnon seemed more and more resentful of the other's attitude of masterfulness.

Duffy slowly tapped the pocket which held his wallet.

"It's too late for you to draw out of it," he

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declared with heat. Then his mounting tinge of anger went suddenly out of his face.

"Pshaw! what're we squabbling about, anyway?" he cried. "We're both making easy money out of this, and that's an end of it. We'll have time to talk later on. And I guess you're busy to-night."

There was a veiled tone of mockery in his voice that seemed to leave McKinnon a little troubled. He followed his visitor to the stateroom door in silence.

"We'll pull together," assuaged Duffy largely, suavely, as he stepped out on the deck. "We've got to, eh?" He laughed a little as he said "Good-night."

"Good-night," answered the operator.

The stateroom door had scarcely closed before the woman had pushed aside the model-case and was out of her hiding-place. Her face had lost its last vestige of colour.

"Oh!" she cried pantingly, and nothing more.

"Hush!" said the alarmed operator, listening at the closed door.

She stood there, breathing hard, with her hand on her breast. Her attitude reminded him of the night before, when she had so suddenly and disturbingly stepped back into his cabin.

"What is it?"

"*That man!*" the woman exclaimed. She

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looked older now under the trying white light of the electrics. Her aura of belated youth had in some way fallen away from her. *"Madre de Dios!* Do you know who that man is?"

"He's an agent named Duffy," explained McKinnon.

"Duffy!"

"Yes—he is acting for the information bureau of the Consolidated Fruit Concern."

He was about to say more, but on second thoughts he kept silent.

"Duffy!" once more cried the woman in derision, "Duffy!"

Then she drew herself up and gazed at her companion with what seemed a look of mingled wonder and contempt wrinkling her low, white brow.

"And you two are working together?" she murmured.

"Yes, in a way."

"But how?" she demanded. "How are you acting with him?"

Her alarm did not seem to disconcert him.

"It's not exactly a partnership. He's simply shadowing a man on this boat. I've promised to help him out when the time comes."

"How help him out?"

"Only in a trivial way."

"But how?"

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"If you must know, by holding back certain despatches."

"But whose despatches?" still demanded the woman.

"Despatches for the man he's shadowing, of course."

"But still you don't tell me who this man is!" cried the impatient woman. McKinnon obviously found it hard to fathom the source of her anxieties.

"I mean this man called Ganley," he explained, concealing his growing impatience.

"Ganley!" echoed the woman.

"Yes, Ganley," retorted the other. He noticed that her breath was coming in short gasps by this time and that her face was as white as his cabin walls.

"Ganley!" she cried. "Why, *the man who went out of this cabin five minutes ago is Ganley!*"

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CHAPTER VIII

THE PAWN AND THE BOARD

THERE was a silence of several seconds.

"*That* man was Ganley?" foolishly repeated the operator. His eyes, as he peered back at the woman, were almost vacuous. He studied her face, perplexed and uncertain, like a traveller studying a road-map. He had expected surprises, he had prepared himself for emergencies; but this, apparently, was more than he had counted on.

The frightened-eyed woman still confronted him, her face seeming one of pity touched with fear. When she next moved, her gesture was almost that of a person wringing their hands.

"And you have promised to act with this man?" she little more than whispered.

"But he came to me as a man named Duffy, the man who's got to turn Ganley over to the authorities at Puerto Locombia."

Still again the woman's wide and pitying eyes rested on his face.

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"They are making a tool of you," was all she said.

"Of me?"

"Of you! They are deceiving you—they mean to make use of you."

"But how?"

The woman remained silent. McKinnon stood before her, lost in a moment of troubled thought, puzzled as to how much he should say and how much it would be best to leave unsaid.

"But who are *you*?" he suddenly demanded, noting her quick glance down at her little jewelled watch. He felt, as she stood there compelling herself to calmness, that there was something epochal in the moment, that in some way the uncomprehended was about to reveal itself.

He turned slowly about and relocked the cabin door. Then he sat down opposite the broken steamer-chair in which she was already seated.

"You want to know who that man is?" she said at last, perplexed a little by his sudden decisiveness, disturbed by the hardening of his face.

"I want to know who *you* are."

"That will come later," she explained.

McKinnon studied her face, line by line, from the pale ivory of her dark-browed forehead to the tender curve of her almost statuelike chin, for the shadowy and thick-planted lashes did

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not lift from her cheek until she began to speak again.

"You want me to explain everything?" she asked.

"Everything!"

"The man who was in this room is Kaiser Ganley—King-maker Ganley they call him everywhere south of Guatemala. His business is to make revolutions. He has agents in almost every one of the Central American republics, in New York, in Cuba, in New Orleans—everywhere. When he sees signs of unrest he sends a man to strike a bargain with the enemies of the government. He waits like a buzzard on a housetop until his meal is ready. Then he is given money, and he brings so many men and so many carbines, and so many mules and machine guns. Sometimes it's for the patriots, sometimes it's for railway charters or for mine rights. Sometimes it's for rubber and coffee concessions. A more conciliatory man must be made dictator, or a more dependable friend must be set up as president. That's the way he won the Caqueta Asphalt concession; that's why he never dares land in Brazil or be seen in Venezuela again."

She paused for a moment. Then she added:

"And now he has the rebellion in Locombia. The Locombian president has been called the

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'Friend of Foreigners'; he has been good to the *Americanos.* He is modern and progressive; he is——"

"Are you a Locombian?"

"I am not a Locombian," answered the woman, after the slightest pause, "but I have my interests in that country. Oh, believe me, I know this man to be its enemy. He is fighting for the downfall of its government. His plan is made. He is only waiting for the end. Now, to-night, while we sit here, his men—deluded peons and beachcombers and paid mercenaries —are drawing up closer and closer on Guariqui. They are to wait there; they are to be moved, like wooden pawns on a chessboard, when he orders it, and in the manner he orders."

"Can't you tell me how or when? Can't you be more specific?"

"On the thirteenth of the month a revolutionist, wearing the uniform of the government, is to assault an American citizen in the Prado of Puerto Locombia. A Mobile ore-boat is to take the assaulter on board openly. He is to be dragged ashore again by government officers. Roof-tiles are to be flung down on these officers as they pass through the town. Arrests, of course, will follow. That will arouse the people—they are so foolish in their hate for the *Americanos!* And while this is going on, many

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miles up the coast machine guns will be landed, and tubs of cartridges, and two thousand rifles."

"But how do you know all this?"

"It became my duty to know it."

"But why?"

"Because my brother is Arturo Boynton, the Locombian minister of war," she answered, after a moment's silence.

McKinnon gazed at her in a mingling of wonder and perplexity.

"Is he a Locombian?"

"No."

"Then why the Arturo?"

"That was a concession to local prejudices," she answered, after still another moment's pause.

"But why such concessions? You see, you'll have to be perfectly frank with me."

She smiled a little. It was not a smile of condescension, for her earnest eyes were almost deprecative as she looked at him.

"That will mean a sad lot of family history," she said with a little shrug, as exotic, almost, as the Southern inflection of her voice.

He laughed a little, too, for all the anxiety that was weighing on him.

"But you see we have to understand each other's position in this."

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"My brother went to Guariqui seven years ago," she said, quite sober by this time. "He was compelled to go there to look after my father's nitrate claims."

"Your father, then, was an American?" interrupted McKinnon. He felt glad, in some vague way, as he saw her head-shake of assent.

"He was an American soldier," she said, and McKinnon noticed the almost phosphorescent kindling of her eyes as she uttered the words.

"Yes," he responded encouragingly.

"We are—or, rather, we used to be the New Orleans Boyntons," she answered. "But father had interests in Argentina, cattle lands and things, and property in Belgrano, where the English-speaking colony is, just outside Buenos Ayres. So for nine years Buenos Ayres was our home—if you could say we ever had a home. But as I wanted to tell you, my brother Arturo was a mining engineer. I think, too, he had a good deal of father's spirit of adventure. He saw great chances in Locombia, but what was more important, he found that the altitude of Guariqui agreed with him. So he stayed on and on, and kept working harder and harder, and getting newer interests, until finally he undertook to work the abandoned government mines with Doctor Duran. They were copper mines."

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"Do you mean Duran the president?"

"Yes; but that was before he had been made president. Indeed, when Duran first actively entered Locombian politics he persuaded my brother to join him. I was at school then, in France—but I know that when their party came into power my brother found himself in Duran's cabinet, as minister of war."

"And you are going down there to face all this?" McKinnon asked, with a vaguely comprehensive wave of the arm.

The woman said "Yes." She looked, for all her inalienable aura of vitality, very slender, and unsuited to the ways of war, above all things, to the ways of Latin-American guerilla war.

"But that seems as brutal, as unthinkable, as a girl going into a ring with two prize-fighters," he tried to explain to her.

"Yes, I know; but I'm not going *into* the ring," she answered. "All I can do is hover about the outside edges of it, and do what I can when I know there is underhand work, when there is foul play like this going on."

"Foul play like what?"

"Like *this!*" she averred, tapping the deck with her shoe-heel.

"Do you mean the *Laminian?* Or do you

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mean certain persons who are on the *Laminian?*"

"Both," she retorted.

"Then that brings us to the question of just why you are going back to Locombia in such a way and at such a time," McKinnon patiently insisted.

"But Guariqui is my home—it is the only home I have, now." She noticed the fleeting look of concern, that amounted to anxiety, overspreading his face, and she hastened to add, with her slow and almost mournful smile: "You know, they often speak of it as the Paris of America! We don't actually tattoo each other down there! And there's something appealing in the life, when you've got used to it—the stir and colour and romance and movement of it all."

"But you see you haven't yet quite explained *why* you are going back to Locombia."

Her deep and troubled eyes seemed to be weighing him; she seemed to be pondering his possible weakness and strength.

"How can I explain to you, when you're a paid agent of Ganley's?"

"Don't be too sure of that!" McKinnon ejaculated, with more feeling, apparently, than the woman had expected.

"You mean you may not work with him?"

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"If you like to take it that way."

"But he has won you over to his side—he has captured you against your will!"

"I don't quite understand," persisted the operator.

"No; but Ganley does. That's why he has bought you over, and led you into his power in this way." She was speaking more rapidly now; a brightened colour had come into her cheeks.

"But how am I in his power?" McKinnon asked.

"What was the paper you signed? What have you promised? What was the money paid over to you for?"

"To hold back certain messages."

"Yes, to hold back messages. And why do that?"

"So that this man Ganley—the man he calls Ganley—can be held at Puerto Locombia."

"You mean the *other* man, the man in the cabin? Then you don't believe what I have said about the real Ganley?"

"I don't know what to believe," the noncommittal McKinnon complained, studying the woman's face. The only conclusion he came to was that it was a disturbingly beautiful one.

She was silent for a moment, apparently deep in thought.

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"I don't ask you to believe me now—it's not fair. But do you realise where you stand?"

The solemnity of her manner, more than her words, prompted McKinnon to ask: "Where do you think I stand?"

"Before danger you scarcely dream of," answered the young woman, returning his gaze. "It's not so much that you have formed an alliance with a criminal, an outlaw, who would have to face a *fusilado* the moment he was caught in Guariqui. But it's the fact that he's as treacherous with his friends as with his foes. You have declared yourself his partner. He will hold you to it. He will use this paper you signed as a proof that you accepted hush-money, if it suits his purpose to do so. He will claim you agreed to work with him. He will hold this over you and force you to act for him."

"But why should I stand for coercion like that?" asked the undisturbed McKinnon.

"What would you do? You can't go to your captain; nor to your company. It's too late for that. You've cut yourself off from them. But that isn't the real danger. The real danger is that Ganley's the actual head of the revolutionary *Junta,* and that he can now show that you, too, are one of them!"

"That I'm one of them?" almost laughed the other.

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"He holds a document which practically brands you as a Locombian revolutionist. We are being carried to a country where things move strangely and quickly. If Duran has the upper hand when we reach Puerto Locombia, you dare not make one move against this man Ganley."

"I dare not, you say?"

"If you do, he will have you handed over to Duran's officers as an enemy of the government—and he will have his document to prove it. If Duran has been deposed, then Ganley is the open and undisputed master, and what he orders you will have to carry out."

"But I'm not going down there to be that government's catspaw!"

"How will you escape it?"

"Well, one way would be to call Ganley up here and get that paper back."

Alicia Boynton laughed quickly and quietly, with an upthrust of her shoulders.

"Can't you see that it's too late? The price has been paid; the bargain's been struck."

"Not necessarily!"

"But a man like Ganley never trades back. The mistake was in the signing of the paper. It was a manifesto, a confession. It was the last will and testament of your good name."

McKinnon, who had been pacing the cabin,

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suddenly swung about and faced the young woman in the steamer-chair.

"Why are you saying all this to me?" he demanded.

Her troubled eyes once more rested on him, almost in pity.

"Because we are facing a common danger," she answered at last. "Because we may yet have to work together to escape from that danger."

"But you haven't told me anything. You haven't explained how or why *you* are in this danger."

Again her studious eyes seemed to be weighing and judging him. He knew by the anxiety that crept slowly into her face as she watched him that her decision was not altogether a flattering one.

"I am here because there was no one to take my place," she answered, simply enough. "I can't explain everything now, but I knew they were plotting against Guariqui and against my brother. I knew, at the last moment, that Ganley was hurrying to Locombia, and I knew that the authorities at Washington were sending a cruiser to the Caribbean, to be near in case of trouble."

"You mean the *Princeton?*" McKinnon asked.

The woman nodded.

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"Listen," she went on after another moment of thought. "Anything may happen before we reach Puerto Locombia. If the *Junta* have carried out Ganley's plans, everything will be ready for his *coup d'état.*"

Her words, for some reason, did not impress him as much as she had expected. She felt that perhaps she was not being specific enough, that she was not making the case sufficiently clear.

"This movement against Guariqui will not be easy," she hurried on to explain, "unless the field-guns have already been landed. The palace is of stone; it could stand to the last—it was built for such purposes. It could hold out for weeks, with only the president's body-guard, until help came."

"From where?" asked McKinnon.

"That is what I must explain. When Duran installed the electric-light plant at Puerto Locombia he put up a wireless station, one at the coast, and another on the palace at Guariqui. Unless the guns have been landed, there is to be no assault on the capital until Ganley has been heard from. Puerto Locombia, of course, will be in the hands of the revolutionists. They will destroy the wireless station at the coast. There are few or no ships there now, on account of the yellow fever. It's not the fever, of course, but the quarantine—the weeks and weeks of impris-

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onment—they are afraid of. This ship will be the only one in the roadstead."

She watched his face with almost a touch of impatience. She looked for some glance or gesture of enlightenment on his part. But he gave no sign of comprehension; so she was forced to go on, explicitly, like a tutor slowly demonstrating the obvious to a perversely backward pupil.

"You are equipped with wireless. That means you will be able to talk with Guariqui. If Duran and my brother are shut up there, calling for help, you will be the only person to hear their messages. Can't you understand? The Guariqui station is not one of high power. It can't possibly call beyond the coast. Yet the cruiser is to be lying somewhere between Culebra and Locombia, waiting to help, only too anxious to interfere at the first official call. But that call can never reach them without being relayed from the roadstead, out across the Caribbean. You may be the only person who can hear and understand Guariqui's cry for help."

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CHAPTER IX

THE CONVERGING TRAILS

McKinnon drew in a deeper breath, slowly and leisurely, but he did not speak.

"Can't you understand?" the young woman in the blue pilot-cloth gown was anxiously demanding of him. "Ganley has thought this all out. He found out we carry wireless equipment. He knew this call would come to us. He has foreseen that we could relay it from Puerto Locombia to the *Princeton*. He knows that you, and you alone, could send that message out of Locombia."

"And you still think he's tried to tie me up, to keep me from sending it! And you insist that those first despatches he filed were simply blinds!"

"Just as his pretense of shadowing Ganley was a blind!" was her prompt retort.

McKinnon fell to pacing the cabin again. The woman watched him without speaking. Then the operator came to a sudden pause.

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"But I'm not free yet. That schemer still has me tied down to him, as you say. We haven't got that paper out of his hands."

The woman nodded her head slowly, without any outward emotion.

"He could still discredit me with the captain of this tub, if that happened to be part of his game! He'd show us both to be a pair of liars the moment we tried to corner him!"

"And once at Puerto Locombia, if his plans have worked out as he wants them to, he can have us dragged ashore! And if Guariqui falls he can have us held as enemies of the new government!"

"This *is* a nice mess!" calmly meditated the long-limbed man standing before her, facing her, for the moment, with abstracted and unseeing eyes. He even seemed to have forgotten the presence of the woman.

She rose from her chair and stood before him.

"We have to get back that foolish paper," she said. "Before everything else we must get back your receipt."

The quiet determination of her voice startled him a little. He stood regarding her with a new light in his eyes. All his training had been repressional; his life had taught him to resist every threatened surrender to the emotional. Yet, as he saw her there, so isolated from her

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kind, so apparently unfitted for the tasks before her, so insidiously appealing in her tender womanhood, a warm and winelike current of sympathy began to creep incongruously through his veins. She must have caught some inkling of that soft invasion, for suddenly, and without apparent reason, her face deepened in colour and then grew paler than before. She held out her hand as though to bridge the awkward silence that had fallen between them. McKinnon saw it was a gesture of farewell.

"Will you promise me to do nothing until I have got this receipt back for you?" she asked as he still held her outstretched hand.

"But why should *you* fight my battles for me?" he asked, wincing a little before her open and courageous gaze. "I can't have you turn highwayman for me?"

There was welling up in him a wayward sense of guardianship over her isolated and fragile figure, of responsibility for her safety and well-being.

"It must be done," she declared with a bitterness that surprised him a little. "There are two doors to Ganley's cabin. It is one of a suite. I can get in through one of those doors."

"Through one of those doors?" echoed the man before her.

"Yes; to-night."

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"To-night?" cried McKinnon, looking down at her in mingled protest and astonishment.

"Hush!" she warned, with her fingers held up close before his face. Their accidental contact with his lips sent a responsive thrill through his nervous body.

"But I won't hear of you doing this sort of thing just because I've been all kinds of a fool. I'm going to this man Duffy, or Ganley, or whatever his name is—I'm going to face him myself and make him put this whole thing right."

"That is impossible," she warned him in her tense whisper. "You do not understand. You don't know this man's ways."

He could see some definite yet mysterious fear shadowed on her face.

"But think of what you're threatening to do!" McKinnon argued. "You have to break into this brute's cabin and steal back a receipt! Think of the risk you'd be running!"

"It has to be done; the sooner it's done the better."

"But why does it have to be done in this way?" persisted McKinnon.

"Because *you* must not do it!"

"Why not?"

"It would be like cannonading canaries—you must save yourself for the bigger risks!"

Her unuttered misery, her inarticulate anx-

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iety, more and more disturbed and depressed him. But there were many things on which he was still uncertain, and above all things he knew that he must go slow.

The woman confronting him must have seen some flash of doubt on his face, for she caught at his arm with a sudden little movement that was as imploring as it was feminine.

"You don't trust me? You don't believe what I have told you?" she cried in her hurrying, low-toned whisper.

"No! no! It's not that!" McKinnon answered. "But I can't quite see my way out—I can't see what it's all leading to."

"But nothing can happen now, here at sea. And you will understand later. Promise me you'll wait!"

"Yes; but wait for what?"

"Until you are free to act, and you know what I have said is true."

He took a turn up and down the cabin. "*Is* this paper so important? I mean, isn't this a lot of fuss and feathers about a small thing?"

"It's one of the small things that count in war—and this is war."

Still again he felt the inapposite and insidious appeal of her womanhood. It wound about him and tugged at him, eroding away his self-will, his old-time careless audacity of spirit, like

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a current eating under a sand-bank. It made sacrifice on her behalf seem a burden to be almost gladly borne.

"Only promise me that you'll wait!" she pleaded. His career had been one of much contention; but never before had he been compelled to fight against what seemed his own self-interest. He felt, in doing so, that he was being thrust and involved in entanglements which should have been evaded as mere side issues. He even marvelled at his sheer lack of resentment against capitulation so indeterminate and yet so complete.

"Promise me!" she whispered. He wanted to beg for time, to think things out, but her troubled face was bewilderingly close to his, and the memory that he was not innocent of the anxiety weighing upon her made him more and more miserable.

"I promise," he answered. The clasp of her hand sent a second inapposite tingle of joy through his body.

"You *will* wait?" she insisted, as though doubly to impress on each of them some future course of action. "You will say nothing until I have done what I promise?"

"There's nothing I can say or do," he replied, still demanding of himself if it could be right to put her to such a test.

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"Then remember," she said, and her voice was little more than a whisper, "we are acting together."

McKinnon still stood there, watching her, as she opened the cabin door and stepped out to the wet and gloomy deck. Something about her departure so paralleled that of the man who had gone before her that the coincidence struck him with a start. It brought the thought through him like an arrow that he had openly pledged himself to two opponents, that he had made a promise to act for two enemies. This was followed by a second and an equally disturbing thought: he had not once been honest or open with her; he was letting his lack of candour make her path a harder one than she deserved.

He sprang through the door after her, swept by a sudden fierce fire of self-hate, of contempt for the things in which he found himself involved.

A moment later he had called her back across the midnight gloom of the dipping and rocking deck.

"What is it?" she asked, as she stepped into the cabin, her eyes wide with wonder. He made sure the deck was empty, and closed the door. Then, with an obvious effort, he wheeled about and faced her.

"It may not be too late for us to get out of

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this mess," he told her, "and get out of it in the right way."

"But what way?" she asked, puzzled by his unheralded change of front.

"The quick way, and the sure way," he answered, swinging across the cabin until he stood before his switch-lever. His hand hovered about the apparatus as he went on. "I mean our way out is to get the *Princeton* now, to-night, before she's out of touch with us! I mean it's best for us to play our card at once, when it's not too late! The *Princeton* has already passed us on her way to Culebra, to replace the gunboat *Eagle;* she's leaving us farther and farther behind every hour!"

"But what do we gain by getting the *Princeton* now?" Alicia Boynton demanded.

He was at the key by this time, and the "crash—rash—rrrrash" of the great spark as it leaped and exploded from the discharging-rods filled the cabin with a peremptory and authoritative tumult of sound. The woman stood watching him, spellbound. A moment later McKinnon's left hand was fidgeting above his tuner, while his right pressed a 'phone-receiver close to his ear.

"What we've got to do is to get that cruiser to Puerto Locombia," he hurriedly went on, as he waited there, without looking up. "She will

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be needed; she *is* needed; and she may as well be told of it now. I mean we'll do what we've got to do while the way's still clear."

"But how can you order about an American warship as though it were a street cab you'd hired?"

"It won't be me—it'll be the wireless that does the ordering."

"But who are you?"

"That's just it—I'm nobody! I'm like those canaries you spoke of; I wouldn't be worth cannonading."

"But you have no power to do this!" demurred the still puzzled woman. "You are not the President of the United States! You have no authority to order about a battleship!"

"I'll *make* the authority!" he cried as he sprang to his key and once more called through the night. "You've said just enough to give me my chance to make my course plain. American interests are threatened in Guariqui at this very moment; American property has already been destroyed in Puerto Locombia. It's only forestalling the inevitable. I mean I'm going to send an official call for that cruiser myself!"

The woman looked at him in amazement as he swung about and clapped the 'phones once more to his ears.

"If we can only get her!" he half groaned

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as he stood with bent head and fixed eyes, listening, while the seconds dragged slowly by. "If we can only get her!" he repeated less hopefully.

He turned to his switch again, and still again the great blue spark erupted and crashed and volleyed from the discharging-rods. Then again he waited and listened, the lines on his face deepening in the hard light from the electrics above him.

"The night's against us!" he exclaimed almost despairingly as the switch came purringly down on the contact-pins and his hand once more went out to his key-lever. His fingers closed on the handle, but the intended call was not sent. No nervous flash of blue flame bridged the waiting spark-gap. For even before he turned, McKinnon knew that his cabin door had been suddenly opened and that a squat and thick-set figure stood there peering in at him.

"What're you workin' that key for?" demanded the figure. It was the thunderous voice of the ship's master, Captain Yandel. McKinnon remembered that he must have overheard the spark-kiss at the masthead, from the bridge.

"What're you tryin' to send out there?" repeated the officer.

"I'm getting distances from a Standard Oil

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tank," answered the man at the table after just a moment of hesitation.

"Distances at this time o' night?"

"You heard what I said, didn't you?" cried the defiant McKinnon.

The enraged officer let his glance wander to the woman, who had backed away a little, as near to the door as possible. McKinnon did not move, but he was thinking both hard and fast. He had already seen the look on the other man's face.

"What's this woman doing here?" demanded Captain Yandel.

The long-limbed operator shot up out of his chair angrily at the barb in that thunderous voice. He kept telling himself to keep cool. It was plainly to be seen that he was still untutored in accepting insolence without protest. Yet still again the challenge was flung at him.

"What's this woman doing in this station at this time o' night?"

McKinnon turned slowly about.

"Shall I tell him?" he asked. His voice was so quiet and seemingly self-contained that the woman's first blind panic of fear slipped away from her.

"Yes, tell him," she answered.

The captain strode into the cabin. He stood behind Alicia Boynton, a little to one side; Mc-

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Kinnon, from the operating-table, faced the intruder. The tones of his voice as he spoke carried a tacit reproof to his superior, a reproof for the boisterous note that had been thrust upon their quiet and orderly talk.

"This woman is my wife!"

"Your what?" cried the captain.

"This woman is my wife!" repeated the operator, without so much as a glance at the panting girl's colourless face. "As you may have the discernment to discover, she is a civilised being, and brutality has no particular fascination for her!"

"And what's all that to do with it?" demanded the captain, warming up to a scene from which he could usually wring his sardonic delights.

"It has this to do with it—that she is making this trip as a passenger. I mention the fact because you may see her in this cabin again, at many times, and at hours quite as unusual as the present."

"I will, will I?" retorted the other.

"You will! And what's more, so long as I do my duty by this ship, and by my company, her presence here calls for no insolence, either official or unofficial!"

"You be *damned!*" roared the master of the ship, aghast at such effrontery.

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"There again I'm afraid I must both disappoint you and disagree with you. And at the same time I'd like to call your attention to the fact that this is a wireless station, and that it stands under the protection of the Berlin International Concordat!"

"To hell with you and your Concordats! This is my ship——"

"Precisely; and I, unfortunately, have been put here to do my work, and I'm——"

"Yes, by Heaven!" broke in the irate captain, "you're here to do your work! You were stuck in here under my nose, for reasons I don't understand; but when you're here you're goin' to do your work as I say! And what's more, I want you to bear in mind that I intend to stay master o' this ship! And while I'm master o' this ship I want no insolence from upstart wire-stretchers! So you do your despatchin' in regular hours, and when I say so, or I'll ship you back to your company in irons!"

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CHAPTER X

THE REVERSE OF THE SHIELD

THE captain of the *Laminian* wheeled about and strode out of the cabin, swinging the door shut with a slam that loosened flakes of white-lead paint from the ceiling-boards.

"So *he's* against us, too!" murmured the operator.

There was a moment of unbroken silence before the woman looked up.

"Why did you say that to him?" she demanded, trembling with indignation. Even her voice shook a little as she spoke. "How dare you say a thing like that?"

McKinnon crossed the room until he stood almost at her side.

"I had to say that," he answered. "It was the only way out."

"A lie—a base lie like that—the only way out?"

"Yes, the only way, for now that man must not suspect."

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"Suspect what?"

"What each of us knows!"

"But you have just challenged his power; you've disclaimed his authority! What can *he* do?"

"He can do anything! On the high seas he's king over this little floating kingdom of his."

"And you, too, are under him?"

"As much as one of his stokers, in a way."

"But what have you gained by a lie like this?"

He found it hard to understand her scruples, to fathom her indignation. He stopped her as she started to speak again.

"Wait! Don't say anything more until I try to explain what it means to you."

He peered out along the deck and then slipped the bolt in the cabin door before he turned to her again.

"Listen! What I have to say is only the other half of your own story, of what you yourself have said. If Duran and his army are shut up in Guariqui, it's because they're there *without ammunition!*"

"You know that?" she cried.

"Yes; and this man Ganley knows it. He knows it because he's been the cause of it. Six hundred thousand rounds of ammunition went out of Mobile for the Locombian troops, for

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Ulloa and his men. They were carried to Puerto Locombia on the *Santa Anna*, secretly, in barrels that were labelled and invoiced as cement, so they could be shipped on to Guariqui without suspicion. But Ganley or the *Junta* or their spies got to know of it. The *Santa Anna* was scuttled in the roadstead at Puerto Locombia. Those cartridges went to the bottom—forty-six barrels with double heads, the heads holding a sprinkling of cement and the main space full of cartridges packed in excelsior. Every pound of it went down."

"This can't be true!" almost groaned the girl at his side.

"Every word of it's true. But let me go on. De Brigard and his men have been in almost as bad a predicament. This advantage was useless unless he had ammunition for his own men. That's where Ganley came in. His agents found that ground iron slag, packed in cases, weighed up to just about what a case of cartridges would. So they bought eighty-eight cases of iron slag from a Hudson River factory town and ferried it down to New York. It was consigned to Locombia, properly enough, as basic iron silicate for fluxing purposes. The law compels all such exporters to file with the port collector a distinct declaration of the goods shipped, the country shipped to, and the name of the consignee. This

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has to be accompanied by oath. Besides the due inspection of the shipment, the shipper has to make his declaration before the consul of the country to which any such goods are sent. All this was done."

"But how do you know this?"

"Let's say that I stumbled upon it in my work as a wireless operator. But here is the real point: in some way, which needn't now concern us, those innocent boxes of powdered slag were tampered with. They became cases neatly packed with ammunition, with just enough iron silicate thrown in to fill up the chinks and cover the real contents. In other words, Ganley and his men have sent out of New York five hundred and eighty thousand rounds of ammunition, consigned to the revolutionary *Junta* at Puerto Locombia!"

"But how do you know this?" once more demanded the listening woman.

"Let me finish, please. Along with those cartridges were sent eight cases of 'structural iron.' These cases, in reality, contain eight hundred Remington rifles. And not only has this stuff been sent out of New York by Ganley and his men, but these guns and cartridges at this very moment *are on this ship, and under this very deck!*"

Alicia Boynton sank slowly down into the

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steamer-chair against which she had been leaning. McKinnon could see that her breath was coming fast and short.

"This can't be true!" she whispered, letting her hands fall weakly between her knees. "They may have said this, but it was only to deceive you, to point out some false trail!"

"One moment, until I explain. I am only the wireless operator on this boat. I am a newcomer, as well, for this is my first run. One hour before the *Laminian* sailed her old operator failed to report, and could not be found. The De Forest Company at once hurried a new man over to the ship. I am that man."

"Still I don't understand. Why are you here?"

"That's what the captain of this ship is so uncertain about. That's why he's so down on us! That's why he's sneaking about and spying on this cabin like a cat on a mouse-hole! I don't mean that he's a paid agent of the *Junta* —I don't even believe he knows what this ship is carrying. He's only soured with alcohol, and jealous—bullheadedly jealous—of his little world of authority."

"But still you haven't told me who you are, or why you came here."

"I am a wireless operator," he said after a moment's glance into the girl's clear eyes, as

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though to fathom just how brightly the old-time fires of intelligence were burning there.

"What *were* you?" she was asking him, her note of frustration seeming to merge into one of distrust.

"I'll have to go back, away back, to make even that clear to you."

"Please do."

"Well, it was over five years ago that I first went to Peru, to look after the electrical equipment of the Pachita Water Power Corporation. They had to protect the forests on their power watersheds, so I wired their whole countryside and equipped their fire-rangers with portable telephones. That meant they could cut in anywhere and send for help in case of emergency. But a peon or a gaucho wouldn't stand for witchcraft like that, and the *mandador* sorrowfully intimated that I was too modern.

"So I next found myself in Nicaragua, with the task of superintending certain telegraph-construction work for Zelaya. When that was finished, for two years I was in the intelligence department of the Brazilian government, but the climate wasn't the sort that a white man could thrive on, and I had to give it up. Then, when the Masso Parra trouble first broke out Magoon invited me over to Pinar del Rio and

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consigned me to a wireless station there. My real duty at Pinar del Rio was to forward cipher reports to Havana and keep the authorities there in proper touch with any filibuster movements in the affected district. Then came a lean year, when I tallied coffee-bags and banana-bunches from a roof-car at Port Limon, until I elbowed my way into a position as night operator on the Costo Rican Northern. It's all very tame to tell about, yet it had its compensating touches of adventure now and then. But I wanted to get North and work out some electrical apparatus that had been preying on my mind."

He came to a stop.

"And you went North?" she prompted him.

He looked up with his quick smile.

"You know there's a certain group of rocks on the Olancho River, near Jutigalpa, where the water is beautifully clear. They say that if you once dive from that cliff, no matter where you go, you will return to Olancho, in the end, that you will die somewhere along the fringe of the Caribbean. I took that dive."

She gave vent to her habitual little head-shake.

"They say the same thing if you drink from the *Fontana di Trevi* in Rome. It's very pretty, but, of course, it's also very foolish."

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"In one way it is, but still it's hard to explain how the unattached man from the North is held by the tropics. That's what made me catch at the old bait when I had a chance to go to the Cantonese District to look into the Chinese boycott affair. And it's the same thing, I suppose, that's taking me south to Locombia."

The girl gave vent to a gesture of impatience, "That doesn't explain."

"What more can I say?" he demanded. He struggled to conceal the fact that he was afraid of her, that life had always taught him to be wary before the unknown factor in the equation of adventure, that her very softness was something against which he had to steel himself, grimly and resolutely.

"You can say everything you have so carefully left unsaid," was her unexpectedly spirited answer.

"There's nothing more," he protested, feeling the silence grow heavy about him.

"I trusted *you!*" said the girl at last.

"And I would trust you!" he said quite openly and honestly.

"You mean you are not free to speak?" she persisted, evading the personal issue which his declaration had thrust before her.

"I mean that it's worse than foolish for us to quibble over side issues when we're confront-

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ed by things of so much more importance. I mean, for instance, that this steamer is carrying ammunition to De Brigard and his men. If that ammunition is delivered into the hands of the Locombian Government instead of to their enemies, Ulloa and his army can at once re-enter the field."

"But why *re-enter* the field? They are free."

"In a way, yes; but they are now shut up in Guariqui, practically, with only a few thousand reserve cartridges and a half ton of useless cordite. But the moment they have made sure that the *Laminian* is safely tied up at the pier in Puerto Locombia they plan to run a banana-train, armoured with boiler-plate, down through De Brigard's lines to the coast. They will fight their way down, probably under cover of night, run their cars out on the pier next to the *Laminian's* berth, seize their slag-boxes as contraband of war, and fight their way back to Guariqui."

"You *know* this?"

"It is the knowledge of this," he guardedly replied, "which makes me say that you and I are compelled, or will be compelled, to act together."

Alicia Boynton did not speak for several seconds, but her studious eyes were fixed on McKinnon's face.

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"You mean that you might be able to warn them?" she asked at last.

"I mean that it might be possible, under certain conditions, for Duran's palace operator to get a message from me. It might also be possible for your brother's men to be aboard this boat five or six hours after that message was received. So why not explain the whole situation by saying that both of us chance to be acting for the same cause? We're fighting for the same end, so no matter how it hurts, or whatever may happen, *we must stick together!*"

"But why leave any mystery between us, if we are already that close?" asked the girl. "Why can't you still tell me everything?"

"I'm beginning to learn that you can't tell things, in my calling, until you're sure of your ground. That's why I had to fling that lie to the captain. It's warfare—and I've got to be true to my people before everything else."

"But who are your people?" she persisted.

He laughed, a little wearily, a little ambiguously. "I have no people," he said. "But we've got to fight for Guariqui, whatever it costs!"

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