THE GUN-RUNNER

A STORY OF WAR AND WIRELESS

BY ARTHUR STRINGER

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SYNOPSIS OF PRECEDING CHAPTER.

The steamship Laminian is bound from New York to Locombia. McKinnon, the ship's wireless operator, sends and receives several odd messages whose possible import sets him to guessing. A passenger calling himself "Duffy" and claiming to be a secret agent for the Fruit Trust, tells McKinnon that Ganley, the famous gun-runner, is aboard the Laminian and that his presence means mischief to Locombia. Duffy wants to see any wireless messages concerning Ganley and wants the privilege of suppressing or of altering the meaning of such messages. He offers McKinnon $1,000 in return for this privilege. McKinnon accepts and signs a receipt for the money. Later Alicia Boynton, another passenger, sister of the Locombian Minister of War, learns of the transaction and tells McKinnon that "Duffy" is really Ganley. Also that by signing the receipt McKinnon has put himself wholly in Ganley's power. The operator declares he will force Ganley to return the paper.

CHAPTER VII.

(Continued.)

ALICIA BOYNTON laughed quietly and wearily, 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. 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, 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 rested on him, almost in pity. He was, after all, little more than a boy.

"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 mournful 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 Carribean, to be near in case of trouble."

"You mean the Princeton?" McKinnon asked.

The woman nodded.

"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'etat. If the revolutionists hold Puerto Locombia we will at once be placed in quarantine there. That will be their pretext for keeping us prisoners of war. It is an old trick. They draw what they call a 'dead line' and they shoot every one who crosses it. That will leave everything clear for Ganley to land; we will be held there until Guariqui is carried. That will not be easy, of course, 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 imprisonment, they are afraid of. This ship will be the only one in the roadstead. 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 ones to hear their messages. Can't you understand? The Guariqui station is 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!"

CHAPTER VIII.

MCKINNON drew in his breath, sharply, but he did not speak.

"Can't you understand?" the woman was saying. "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 he's tried to tie me up, to keep me from sending it! And those first despatches he filed were simply blinds!"

"Just as his pretense of shadowing Ganley was a blind!"

McKinnon fell to pacing the cabin again.

"Will you promise me to do nothing until I have got this receipt back for you?" she asked.

"Wait!" he said, turning to his apparatus. "The cruiser Princeton may be near enough to pick up a message. I'll tell her what I know and have her rushed to Puerto Locombia. I'——"

He checked himself. Capt. Yandel stood in the doorway.

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

"This woman is my wife!" declared the operator, without so much as a glance at the panting girl's colorless face. "As you may have the discernment to discover, she is not strong."

"And what has that to do with it?"

"It has this to do with it—that she is making this trip as a cabin 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!"

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! Because we're going to fight Ganley together, whatever it costs, however it hurts!"

CHAPTER IX.

IT was the next morning that McKinnon came unexpectedly face to face with Alicia Boynton, in one of the Laminian's narrow companionways.

"I got into Ganley's cabin while he was at breakfast," she said. "The receipt is not there. He must be carrying it in his wallet."

"But there was something else I did find out. It is that eight mountain guns are to be shipped out of Mobile this week, invoiced and crated as steam laundry equipment. They are Hotchkiss rapid-fire guns, breech-loading and with fixed ammunition. Those are the guns that are to be landed somewhere in Northern Locombia. They can be taken apart, piece by piece, and carried up through the hills to Guariqui on burros.

"My second discovery was even more important. It began with what seems to be a note from one of De Brigard's generals. It mentions eighty-eight cases of cartridges and 800 Remington rifles which are on this ship, and under this very deck. The ammunition is in boxes of powdered slag and the rifles are disguised as cases of structural iron.

"As far as I can make out, they intend to commandeer a certain eight-horse-power track-motor from the Consolidated Fruit Concern. They are to seize it and take it from the roundhouse just north of Puerto Locombia. De Brigard's men intend to run this motor out on the railway along the pier, at night, and keep it hidden in the Fruit Concern's weigh scales shed, not forty feet from where the Laminian will be sure to dock. Then, as far as I can make out, the slag boxes are to be quietly dropped over the side and piled up in the motor's tonneau. Then it is to be hurried out along the railway track to Coconut Hill, where everything is to be stored in the power house until the Junta distributes the supplies to De Brigard's men."

"But what power house is this?"

"I mean the electric light power-house just outside the town."

"This is worth knowing!"

"But, this isn't the problem that's blocking our way," his companion warned him. "The first thing we must do is to recover our lost ground. We have to get back this receipt that ties you down to Ganley!"

"But even for that we have to wait our chance!"

"Why not make the chance? Ganley is in hourly dread of every message that comes into your wireless room. He insists on censoring anything that might betray him. Then, after he has gone to bed to-night, why not send for him—hurriedly call him up to your operating room? Why not insist that he should come, before he has time to dress? The mere fact that he carries this receipt about him on his person, as you said, shows how precious he holds it to be. But if he's caught off his guard, in that way, he might forget. You might easily enough keep him there with you for ten or fifteen minutes!"

"You mean the chances are that he'll simply throw on anything that's nearest him, blanket or a bath-robe, if it's late enough?"

"Yes."

"But there's the captain," objected McKinnon. "There's the scene we went through last night!"

"Then wait until the captain has gone to his cabin for the night. The later it is when you call, Ganley, the better. I can be waiting. The moment he has left his cabin, locked or unlocked, I can be there making my search."

"But if he goes back to his cabin without waiting for me to transcribe the message?"

"Then you would have to warn me!"

"Wait," he said, as a sudden thought came to him. "I might send one word, a simple word like 'Go.' You could easily recognize it, then, as a warning. That would be simple enough, if you could only remember the Morse."

"Would it be hard?"

He tapped out the dots and the dashes with his finger-tips, on the rod of brass from which the berth-curtains hung.

"That will be the danger signal," she agreed. "When I hear it, I'll understand!"

Late that night McKinnon sent for a steward.

"Tell the passenger in stateroom 11 to come to the wireless room at once," he requested. "Get him here quick, for it's important!"

Presently Ganley appeared. McKinnon affected to be busy "receiving" and took no note of his arrival.

"Well?" queried Ganley.

"You said you wanted to look over anything special that came in," began the operator, laying down his phones.

The man at the table as he tore the written sheet from his form-pad knew that he was being closely and keenly watched. This prompted him to toy with the situation for another moment or two.

"Do you know anything about this Locombian mixup?" was McKinnon's casual question as he peered down at the sheet in his hand.

"Not a whole lot," guardedly answered the man in the raincoat.

"I've picked up a Savannah liner bound north; she relays the news from the Atlas fruiter. They've got this revolution of Ganley's in full swing!

"They report that the revolutionary forces under De Brigard met the Government forces under Ulloa on Tuesday. It was twenty miles southwest of Puerto Locombia; De Brigard was convoying eight mountain guns up toward Guariqui!"

"Well?" the stolid and guarded figure demanded; and that was his only comment. McKinnon bent over as though to consult the message sheet.

"They report that De Brigard has pounded his way through the Locombian lines, and has occupied Itzula!"

Before McKinnon could realize it the man was on his feet.

"One moment," he called back as he crossed the room.

McKinnon caught up a message sheet and intercepted his enemy at the door.

"I want you to see this despatch," he said, catching at the other's arm and talking against time. "I want you to understand what this 'Three-Four-Five-Two—Six Refunfuno' means. You'll see it here in the A B C Telegraphic Code. It means 'Revolution broken out here.' I want you to see it for yourself. Then you'll know"——

"I'm taking your word for it, young man," retorted the other as he shook his arm free and started through the door.

The operator knew only too well what the man's return to his cabin meant at such a moment. And he darted to his switch lever, pounding out the agreed signal. Then he ran for Ganley's cabin. The cabin was empty. In a nearby stateroom he heard Alicia's voice.

"How dare you come into this cabin?" she was crying.

"This is a little dose of your own medicine, young woman!"

It was Ganley who had spoken.

"How dare you!" she gasped.

"Cut out that play-acting. And stand back against that wall there. So! Now hand out that stuff of mine; every line and rag of it!"

It was the woman who spoke next.

"I have nothing to hand out."

"I'll give you ten seconds," protested Ganley, "I'll give you ten seconds to get those papers of mine into my hand here, every shred of 'em!"

"I have no papers of yours," declared the more and more terrified woman.

"I'm no fool—I saw 'em—I caught you at it!"

"Will you leave my cabin?"

"Then explain what you've got stuck down in your waist."

"It's nothing of yours."

"Hand it out, or I'll rip those clothes off your back."

"I can't," was the woman's answer, scarcely more than a whisper.

"Hand it out!" Then came a second or two of unbroken silence.

"You're going to shoot!" gasped the woman. It was only too evident that Ganley had stepped closer to her.

"No," he said, his thick voice shaken a little with his close-held passion. "I'm not going to shoot. But I'm going to pound your lying head in with this gun-grip—I'm going to pound you till your own mother wouldn't know you!"

The woman uttered a little cry, not shrill enough to be a scream, not low enough to be called a moan. It was then that the waiting McKinnon swung open the door and sprang into the room.

He was barely in time to behold the infuriated Ganley, with his heavy black handled Colt revolver held by its barrel, charge on the girl, who stood with her back against the cabin wall. He was not in time to prevent the blow that fell on the girl's out-thrust forearm, as blindly and instinctively she threw it up to guard her head. But as the clubbing gun-butt raised for its second frenzied blow, the intruder sprang. As he sprang he caught the swinging revolver in his hand. One quick movement, one twist of the levering grip, wrenched it free. The next moment McKinnon's fingers were clamped on Ganley's fat and pendulous throat, and he had the man in the black raincoat gasping for breath, pawing the air with his thick, fat hands.

"You hound, to treat a woman like that!" was all the overwrought McKinnon could say.

"I caught the she-cat—I caught her coming through my door!" cried Ganley, getting his breath again.

"Are you hurt?" the operator demanded of the woman still motionless against the wall.

"No," she answered.

"Then I'll settle this with the gentleman myself, in his own cabin, or in the captain's, if he prefers!"

But Ganley was on his feet at once.

"Nobody's going to leave this room," he declared, with an oath. "That woman's lifted documents o' mine that aren't going to get out o' this cabin."

"Who is this woman?" demanded McKinnon.

"Who is she!" cried the exasperated Ganley. "I know who she is, and she knows I know!"

"Have you anything of this man's?" McKinnon asked the girl suddenly, realizing that his intrusion had not yet amounted to a complete betrayal of his own position.

"Yes," said the woman.

"What is it?" asked the operator.

"A slip of paper."

"Then hand it out to me," ordered Ganley.

"No, hand it to *me*," interposed McKinnon, as he watched the slowly withdrawn hand that held a crumpled sheet of white paper.

It was then that the girl fell back a step or two along the cabin wall. She held the paper between her hands, as she did so, and with a quick movement of her trembling white fingers and before either of the men could stop her, she tore the sheet in two, again and again.

"I'll *kill* you for that!" choked Ganley, shaking and twitching, but not moving from where he stood.

McKinnon, with the revolver still in his hand, stepped between them.

"There's been enough of this prizering work," he cried, as he faced Ganley. "I want to know what all this means."

"Are you the master of this ship?"

"I'm the master of this situation," retorted the wireless operator, with a pregnant upthrust of the revolver which he still held in his hand. "And before our party breaks up I'm going to understand what it means."

"Then ask this woman what she stole from me!"

"It was the contract made between this man and the wireless operator of this ship," she deliberately answered.

"A contract?" said McKinnon.

"It was the agreement you signed to become a partner of this man."

"And you tore this agreement up?" demanded McKinnon, with an assumption of incredulity.

"You saw me tear it up," she replied, wondering, in turn, just what was expected of her, anxious not to endanger him by any foolish misstep on her part.

"Why?" asked McKinnon.

"I could not see any one tied to a man whose hands are stained with blood."

Ganley laughed a heavy and mirthless laugh, as though resenting the theatricality of the woman's phrase. "That's a hell of a reason," he mumbled in his sullen gutteral.

"I did it because I know what this man is," went on the woman, turning her slow and puzzled stare from the operator to Ganley.

McKinnon, now in perfect control of himself, wheeled about to Ganley.

"You are Richard Duffy, acting with the Consolidated Fruit Concern and the authorities at Washington for the capture of a man named Ganley, are you not?"

"I am."

"The man lies," said the girl in her calm and deliberate tones. "This man is Ganley, 'King-maker Ganley,' himself!"

"You're crazy!" scoffed Ganley.

"Look at his hands and you will see! He went to Lhassa in the pay of a Russian secret agent. And they caught him and crucified him on one of their convent walls—they nailed him there through the hands. You can see the marks! He can't lie those away, for he hung there twelve hours, until a tribesman set him free and spirited him across the frontier. And this is the great soldier who gave you money"——

"I've had enough of this," said McKinnon as he held his hand out toward the sullen-faced Ganley. In this outstretched hand was a roll of bills held together by a rubber band.

"What's this?"

"It's your money!" said McKinnon as he dropped it on the berth beside the man. "This thing's too tangled up for me. I'm out of it! And I've got a key waiting for me upstairs!"

"This woman," broke out Ganley, "is a cheap little adventuress. She and her crooked brother have coined money on concessions and on cooked up claims.

"And when they'd wrung their money out of those," he went on, "they dished up a Locombian nitrate claim, and drained that dry. And when that was picked clean they wheedled their way into Duran's good graces. And then, to cinch her graft, this woman, this pink-and-white beauty right here before you, married a Santo Domingan half-caste filibuster who'd made a half-million out of brandy smuggling and counterfeiting!"

CHAPTER X.

MCKINNON felt as though the deck under him had opened and let him down into the depths of a chilling sea.

"Is this true?" he demanded of the woman before him.

"No," whispered the woman.

"Have you a husband?"

"No."

"And you never married a mangy, half-caste, diamond-wearing Santo Domingan named De Perralta?" demanded Ganley.

"I married a man named Perralta,"

"But you have just said you had no husband," said McKinnon.

"He was dragged from the carriage an hour after the ceremony—after our marriage. I have not seen him since that day. Seven weeks later he died of yellow fever."

"And tell him why he was dragged from that carriage," prompted Ganley.

"He had shot the wife of a government official named Gurmanito in Bogota," she answered in her listless monotone. "That was only one of other things."

"Other things which made him almost worthy of the family he'd married into," interpolated the scoffing Ganley, in luxurious appreciation of her misery. McKinnon could see that she was shaking, that her whole body was quivering. When she spoke again, hurriedly, her voice was higher in pitch, as though the strain upon her was becoming a tension she could no longer control or endure.

"I have never spoken of these things," she said in her tremulous soprano, facing McKinnon. "But I want you to understand. It was three years ago, when I was little more than a schoolgirl. I was under a great debt of gratitude to this man who—to this man Perralta. I had been left in care of the American consul at La Guayra; I had taken an English steamship to Venezuela, after two years in a French convent. I was to re-embark from La Guayra for Puerto Locombia, but quarantine was established, on account of bubonic plague, before I could get away. I had to live at the consulate on short rations—the American consul had refused the demand of the Venezuelan Government for a certificate that La Guayra was free of the plague. He and his family were taken off by a United States gunboat, the Paducah, and I would have been sent to the detention camps had it not been for this man Perralta. He seemed a gentleman, then, and had money and influence. He played his part well. He leased a seagoing tug and had me and my companion, a German woman, carried out of the infected district. After we had passed the necessary period of quarantine, for observation, in the English hospital at Georgetown, we went on to Guariqui—and he followed us. I did not understand, then—and I was very grateful to him—I tell you all this because—because I want you to understand."

"I do understand," answered McKinnon.

"And is that all?" asked Ganley, with his careless sneer.

"Yes; that is all."

"Not by a long shot!" retorted Ganley, in heat. "I want later history than all this! I want to know just what this woman's got of mine."

"There's a very simple way to settle this problem," McKinnon suggested. "We'll lock this cabin, so nothing in it can be interfered with. The three of us will step into your cabin. You'll then go through your belongings, these documents and papers of yours, and I'll check them off as you do so, one by one. It will be easy enough to tell then if anything is missing."

The proposal aroused no enthusiasm in Ganley.

"This is not the hour o' night I care to go into the general-auditing business," was his reply.

"Nor is it altogether the hour of night for keeping a young lady out of her bed!"

Ganley hesitated a moment; then rose and left the cabin.

"I have told you an untruth," said the girl, as she and McKinnon were left alone.

"In what way?" asked McKinnon.

"I told you that my husband was dead," she answered in her low and constrained voice. "He is not dead."

"He is not dead?" echoed McKinnon.

"I said that he died of yellow fever. He took the fever and was ill with it. But he did not die. He was sentenced and sent to the Island of Malpanto, on the Pacific Coast. The Locombian penal colony is there. He was sent there, for life. He was dead to all the world—he was dead to me. Penal servitude is a cause for absolute divorce, in Locombia. I divorced him."

"And Ganley knows this?"

"I have a better reason for being against him. If he and his Liberal Party once acquire power, Ganley will annul that divorce. He will bring Perralta back to Guariqui and commute his sentence. He will do this to strike at my brother, Arturo, to dishonor us in the republic, to hound us out of Locombia."

"Won't you let me fight this fight out for you?" asked McKinnon, surrendering to the tide of feeling that seemed tearing him from all his old anchorages.

"If we only could!" she said, inadequately.

"I'd fight hell itself for you," he told her.

CHAPTER XI.

ACTING on Alicia Boynton's suggestion, McKinnon kept his station under lock and key. He also went armed, as she had pleaded with him to do, though he felt this latter precaution to be unnecessary.

The Laminian's wireless operator sat in his room one day

"Could you take a message for me, if you're in touch with anything?" asked Ganley from the doorway.

McKinnon reached a long, thin arm over to the back of his operating table.

"Here, I wanted to give you back this gun of yours," he said, as he held the revolver out to its owner.

Ganley took it diffidently, turned it over in his fingers, puckered his heavy lips and casually dropped the gun into his side pocket. Then he looked up at the other man.

"That was pretty ugly talk you got about me the other night," he began, sliding low in his chair until his attitude was nothing more than a nonchalant lounge. "I suppose you swallowed it whole—everything that attractive young woman said?"

"I don't believe everything I hear."

"I tell you you've got to swing in with us," Ganley suddenly declared to him. "You haven't any show. This work is going to be done quick and done quiet."

"But how about leaks?"

"There's not going to be any leaks. Every small craft and coaster that swings in to Puerto Locombia next week is going to be held there, in quarantine. That won't be anything to worry over, for we're the only sizable thing that's due there. But if any of those tramp tubs should happen to have wireless aboard—and it isn't likely—we're going to take over their apparatus as contraband of war. The only thing we don't want is interference from outside. It's our fight, and once we win it there'll be no trouble. We're a nation then, you see, the New Liberal Party. We're a government of our own, and we can go back and patch up outside quarrels when we see fit."

"But what will you do with the Laminian? How about our captain, for instance?" McKinnon asked.

"I'll tie him up so tight in quarantine that his anchor flukes'll be barnacled before he gets away again," he said, with a snort of contempt for that saturnine ship's master. "Oh, I've got this thing figured out as close as a sum in arithmetic. Some night this week our men are to surround their little two-by-four capital. Tuesday morning, by daybreak, if our guns and stuff are all landed, they'll begin to cannonade. By Tuesday afternoon we'll be advancing on the Palace itself. By Wednesday night we'll have Duran and his gang shelled out or our own men shoved in. By sunup on Thursday we'll have Duran deposed and the new government declared, an hour after those Palace gates come down, with our own men in office. There's no use my beating round the bush with you any longer. It's all got to come. And I don't want you workin' against us. I don't want to see you cuttin' your own throat. And if you see us through for the next two or three days I'll do the right thing by you."

"How the right thing?"

"I'll deed you over a third interest in the Parroto chromium mines and make you minister of telegraphs for the new republic with a salary of six thousand dollars in gold!"

"I would rather think it over for a day or two," was McKinnon's answer.

"You'll be with us all right."

It was two days later that the Laminian swung in toward the coast of Locombia.

McKinnon, in his cabin, labored in vain over his tuning box and responder. He had held Ganley off for another day, hoping against hope that something might still be picked up.

Already, on the ship's bridge, the navigating officer in soiled duck had picked up the Toajiras Light. Behind that light lay the flat and miasmal Locombian coast. And somewhere, still farther to the southwest, armies were being arrayed against each other. Somewhere, across the deepening night, men were ambushing and shooting.

The night was well advanced when a great wide-shouldered figure passed quietly along the empty bridge-deck. This figure cautiously tried the door of the wireless-room, but found it securely locked. Then he crept about to the half-open shutter and stood there, minute after minute, in an attitude of listening. McKinnon was at his machine, taking a message.

The call was coming clearly now, repeated again and again. "Pt-Ba," "Pt-Ba," came the query through the night. McKinnon, as he listened and "tuned up" to the other man's tensity, could recognize the nature of the "send" as one would recognize the accent of a Westerner in Boston or a Londoner in Dublin. It was the unmistakable yet undefinable inflection and cadence of a navy man. It was an American battleship of some sort, calling Puerto Locombia.

McKinnon was on his feet again, tingling with excitement. He threw down his switch-lever, caught up his key, and sent the answering call rattling and exploding across his spark-gap, loud above the purr of the wakened dynamo.

Then he turned again to his phones and listened. They had not tuned up to him; they had not picked him up. For still again came the call "Pt-Ba," "Pt-Ba." It was out of the hours for sending. The engine-room had diminished his power, leaving him without voltage enough to make a "splash" that would reach the warship.

But his hand went out to his form-pad and he bent over it, busy with his transcription, as the noise pulsing and creeping in through his receivers translated itself into intelligibility.

This is cruiser Princeton lying off harbor of Torreblanca. Send word of Guariqui situation. Mobile despatch two days ago asserts protection wanted for American interests. Please instruct our Consul send immediate advice.

LIEUT. VERDU.

Then came a minute or two of silence, and then the call again, followed by the repeated message:

Pt Ba: Are you asleep? Why does Princeton get no answer?

LIEUT. VERDU.

Automatically McKinnon wrote out the despatches, word for word, as a matter of record. His chance had come at last; all he now needed was power. It would take him but a minute to slip down to the engine room, he concluded, as he threw on a striped green bathrobe with a hood like a monk's cowl. Then he could see to it himself that they were slinging the right voltage up to him. He sprang for the cabin door, unlocked it and swung it open. As he leaped out across the door sill he ran head-on into the arms of Ganley.

"I'd like to glance over that message," suggested Ganley.

"This is ship's business."

"Could I look over that message?" requested Ganley, leveling a revolver at the operator.

"Read it, if you want to!"

Ganley pounced on it, like a cat on a cornered mouse. He backed away to the door, but kept his revolver still poised in front of him while he read. McKinnon, as he watched the gun-runner calmly restore the sheet of paper to his table, saw the chance he had at first hoped for slip past him.

"Don't you think we'd better kill that message?" Ganley suggested, with a pregnant movement of his right hand.

"No, I don't see why."

"I'll tell you why," said Ganley. "I'm going to be up here on this deck of yours to-night—I've decided it's cooler than that cabin of mine. Seein' this is our last night at sea, I'm going to enjoy it. And the sound of any message, of any message whatever, going out to those wires up there, is going to spoil my night! Is that plain enough for you?"

"You own this ship?"

"No, but I'm goin' to," was Ganley's placid report.

"And this is your apparatus?"

"And my particular little corner of the earth," responded Ganley.

"And supposing I don't kill this message?"

"Do you s'pose I'm going to let a couple of children like you"—and he threw a world of contempt into the word "children" as he uttered it—"step in and try to stop my steam-roller?"

"You haven't told me why!" retorted the dogged McKinnon.

"Well, this is why," said Ganley, and he leaned closer in through the door as he spoke. "If you don't choose to put a padlock on that wire, I'm going to put a padlock on you!"

"Just what do you mean by that?"

"I mean that you'll kill that message, or I'll kill you!"

Then he shut the cabin door quietly and the operator was left standing alone in his station.

CHAPTER XII.

MCKINNON was aroused by a quick, light knock, repeated for the second time. He took up his revolver, slipped it into the loose side pocket of his bathing-robe and cautiously opened the door.

It was Alicia Boynton who stepped in as he did so, pushing him sharply back and closing the door even more sharply after her.

"I have heard every word," she explained, in her low and intimate tones. "I was leaning on the rail, under the bow of the lifeboat. I waited until Ganley passed behind the officers' quarters. He's walking up and down, smoking—and waiting."

"There's going to be trouble here, to-night," he warned her. "I'd rather you went below."

"I couldn't, now."

"I had the Princeton, at Torreblanca."

"The Princeton! Then we are wasting time—we're getting farther and farther away from her every minute."

"No, that's impossible if she's lying off Torreblanca. We're drawing a little closer to her, if anything. The danger is that he'll leave his instrument before I can call again. And I've got to have power from the engine-room."

"Then I'll watch your key while you go below," she promptly suggested. He pondered the problem for a moment or two.

"No, that would be inviting danger. I want you to carry this message to the engine-room for me."

"But what will you do—when the power comes?" she asked.

"I'm going to send. I'll fight it out with him. Ganley can't dictate to the high seas of the world."

"Why couldn't I go to the captain?"

"That's worse than useless. He's drunk. And we'd only get him against us, for he'd order us to keep out of the mess. He'd fight shy of entangling alliances. He'd forbid me to send, for he's got his ship to clear from that port."

He told her briefly the way to the engine room. Then he switched off his light, unlocked the door and glanced out to see that the way was clear. Yet he waited at the open door with his revolver in his hand until he had made sure she was below stairs. Then he locked himself in again.

As he waited for the girl's return he busied himself pulling out his trunk and standing it on end, to be shoved against the locked door as a further reinforcement against possible attack from outside. The wall plates themselves, he knew, could never be penetrated by a bullet; it was the wooden-shuttered window and the door alone that needed defense. Then came footsteps, a cry of alarm and an answering voice that snarled:

"You keep out o' here!"

It was Ganley's voice, short and brusque. The knob of the locked door twisted and moved; the girl must have caught hold of it from the outside. It was equally plain, from the sound of her sudden gasp and the scuffle that followed, that Ganley had flung her aside from the door.

McKinnon switched out his light before he opened that door, for he wanted every chance. The first message that flashed to his brain was that it was very dark outside. The second was that a great mallet-like hand had descended unexpectedly on his own, out of this darkness, and had sent his revolver rattling across the boards of the cabin floor. His next was the knowledge of clinching and writhing and struggling with a fighting and heaving hulk that bore him quickly back over his doorsill. Then came a brief and bitter battle for what seemed to be a short barrelled, heavy-butted revolver in one of the mallet-like hands. The revolver fell away from them both in the hot and stifling blackness of the cabin, but still they clawed and panted and writhed from side to side. Then came the sound of the door slammed shut, and the woman crying to McKinnon to turn on the light. He dropped low and twisted sharply, tearing himself loose from the ape-like arms.

"The light—turn on the light!" cried the woman, as though apprehensive of some danger he could not fathom.

McKinnon, still panting and shaking, sprang for his light-switch and snapped on the current. The blank darkness puffed into a sudden picture. It showed in sparkling high-lights on the wireless apparatus. It revealed the huddled figure of Ganley crouching back against the sleeping berth. It showed the white faced and terrified woman close by the cabin door. But that was all; for in the next second the light went out again, and the cabin was once more blanketed in utter darkness.

But McKinnon, in that brief heart-throb of illumination, had caught and fixed in his mind's eye the position of his fallen revolver. He was on his hands and knees on the floor like a cat, crawling to the further corner of his dynamo base.

(To Be Continued.)

Oiling Up!

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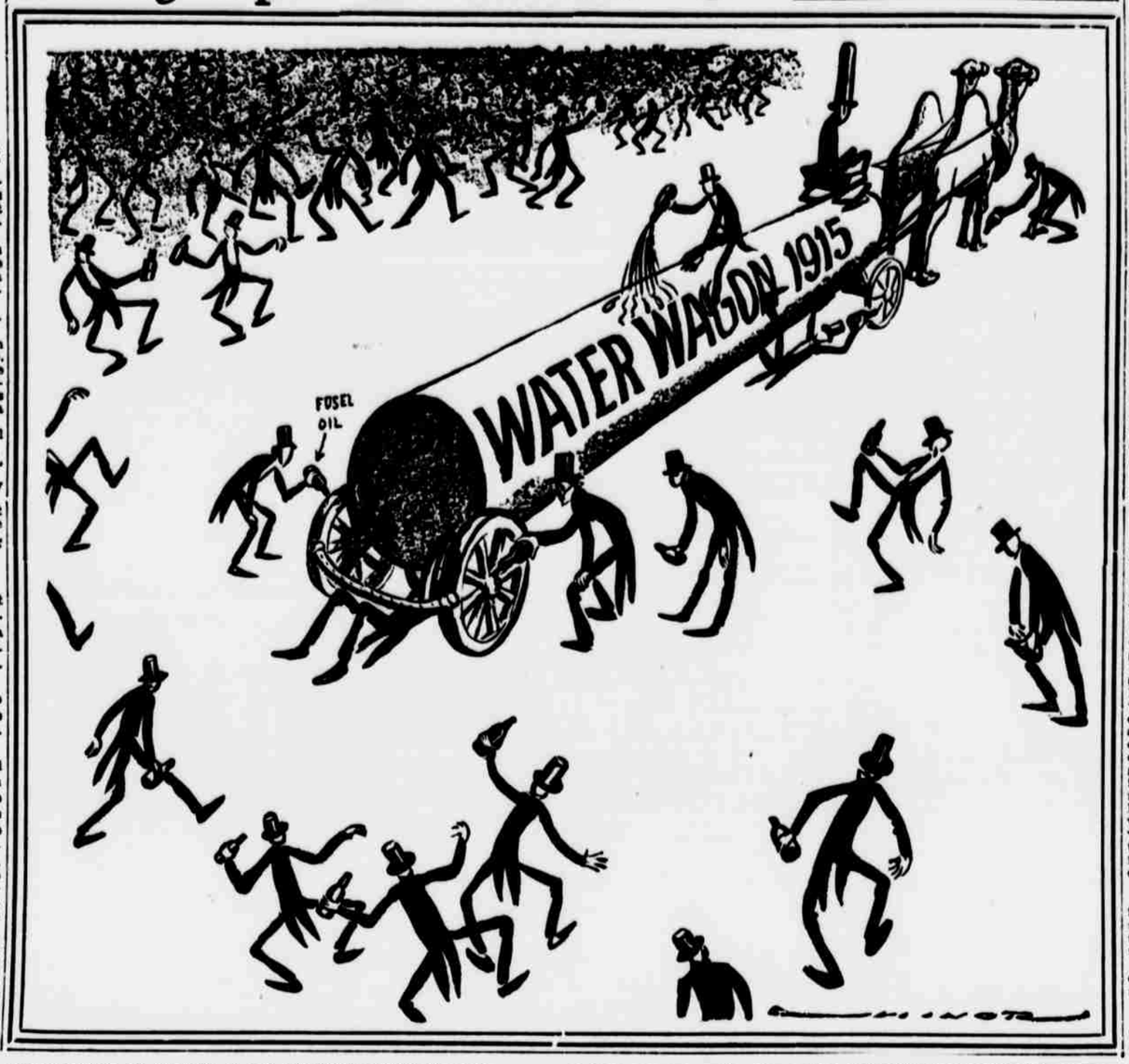
By Robert Minor



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