

There was an end to those cheerful little musicales at McBain's house, although Skane still walked there alone, stayed for a meal, and returned in the howling dark. Occasionally McBain phoned to Carney and offered to drive up with the buggy and fetch him and Isabel down "for tea and a bit of chat." But when Matthew turned to question Isabel she glanced at the fuming dunes and shrugged, and he returned to the instrument offering apologies in his slow voice and murmuring something about "later on, when the weather's improved a bit." In truth they were prisoners all; from end to end of Marina the people stayed close to their stoves, and only the beach patrols ventured forth. They chatted back and forth by telephone, except when the wire blew down—a common occurrence—and each night they peered forth at the beams of the East and West lighthouses to assure themselves that all was well.

The sound of the spark no longer outraged Isabel. She had grown used to it, as Matthew had foretold. Often it wakened her in the night, but now she could turn and burrow into sleep again. She had learned the code. It was not difficult—much easier than shorthand, she pointed out to Matthew. When the days grew short and the evenings intolerably long she fell into the habit of sitting at the instruments with the man on watch. He would plug in an extra pair of phones for her and explain this point or that in the Babel of dots and dashes that filled her ears.

At first the great passenger liners were beyond her grasp. They shrilled away on high notes like operatic sopranos, and at speeds close to thirty words a minute. The smaller liners and the tramps were more companionable, droning along at twenty or so; and frequently there were trawlers, rolling scuppers-under out there somewhere on the Banks and muttering away to each other at a childish ten or fifteen. The trawlers were Isabel's kindergarten class, and after a time she could follow the drift of tramp steamer conversations, watching her companion's pencil for the letters she missed.

She learned to send as well. She cajoled Matthew into rigging a small key and buzzer at the end of the long instrument table, and there she practiced with a diligence that surprised the men and somewhat surprised herself. The others helped her, Mat-

thew with indulgence, Sargent with the pleased but somewhat lofty air of a young man who sees a woman trying to play a man's game; but it was Skane who took the deepest interest. He would sit listening patiently while she spelled out in wobbly Morse whole pages of some stale and tattered magazine, or a chapter from that bible of their craft, the *Handbook of Wireless Telegraphy*.

"Stop!" he would exclaim. "You're clipping your dashes again!" Or, "You muffed those dots, 'h' has four" . . . "a bit more space between words" . . . "try to get a rhythm into it, as if you were tapping a drum, say." Or he would snap, "Keep your wrist down."

"But I can make the dots more sharply when I lift my wrist!"

"Sure! But how long could you keep it up on that big key yonder? You'd have telegrapher's cramp in twenty minutes, and then you'd be falling all over your message and the chap at the other end would tell you to get another operator—the way kids in the city jeer at a broken-down car and yell 'Get a horse!' You want to do it all with your fingers. God gave you a wrist too, or didn't you know? Forget your fingers. They're just for holding on to the knob. You've got to use your wrist and to some extent your forearm if you want a steady style."

Matthew, looking on, would smile and say mildly, "After all, Skane, she isn't planning to go up for a ticket." And she would cry, "But I want to learn, Matthew! Greg, show me how to hold my hand again." And Skane would adjust her fingers and press her wrist down to the proper angle, and murmur, "All right. Take it from there—and don't try for speed. That'll come with practice. Just concentrate on sending stuff that the other fellow can read. It's like handwriting. Keep your mind on writing a good hand and forget everything else. Now!"

The whimsical attitude of Matthew and Sargent nettled her. She determined to confound them. She had taken it up merely to pass the time but soon it became an obsession. She discovered that she had a knack for it. The nervous skill of wrists and fingers that for years had rattled a typewriter at top speed could be adapted to a telegraph key.

One day when Matthew and Sargent had gone for a walk

along the beach she sat at the instruments with Skane, copying word for word with him the messages of a freighter bound for Boston. There followed a lull in the phones, one of those dull periods that came in every watch, when all the ships and shore stations fell silent together as people sometimes do in a busy room.

"Greg," she begged, "give me another sending test—now, while the others are out." Obediently he slipped aside one of the phones, and she moved to the practice key. Skane stared at his wrist watch.

"Okay, go ahead."

She tapped out a dozen paragraphs of the *Handbook*, working earnestly, with the tip of her tongue caught between her teeth.

"Well?" she asked eagerly, looking up.

"An average of sixteen words a minute, I'd say, and perfectly done, all but the 'c' in 'inductance'—you bungled that. But you've come along. Gosh, you really have!"

She flushed with pleasure. "Don't tell the others."

"Why?"

"I'm still not satisfied. What's top speed?"

"About thirty words, on one of these old-pump handle keys anyhow. That's fast, mind you. A hundred and fifty letters a minute. When you're doing that, you're pounding brass and no fooling. Of course you'll find—don't think I'm being superior—you'll find that fifteen words a minute come fairly easily once you've learned the code. Then with a bit of practice you reach twenty. After that every word you add to your speed comes mighty hard. Mind you, twenty's the minimum for a First Class ticket and most ship ops don't go any faster than that. It's different on busy shore stations and on the big liners, where at times you've got a lot of traffic to clear off."

"How fast does Matthew send? I mean when he's not rushed?"

"Usually twenty or less. Nobody ever rushed Matt. He's got an easygoing style, nothing fancy, a good clear fist that anyone could copy all day."

"What about Sargent?"

"Depends on how he feels. He's a smart kid. Likes to rattle it

off at thirty when he's working a liner like MKC—that's *Olympic*—where the ops are topnotch. Usually goes along at twenty-five, though. It's much more comfortable if you've got a lot to send."

"And you?"

"About the same."

"You're modest. Matthew says you and a chap named Merton at Cape Race are the crack operators on this coast."

Skane regarded his bony hands and long fingers with the wisps of black hair on their backs. "I can rip it off at thirty, if that's what you mean. But it's only swank to do that when twenty-five or less will handle the traffic. Matt used to say there ought to be a printed motto in every station working ship traffic—*Twenty's Plenty*. When you're young like Sargent you feel the urge to tear it off as fast as you can, and you get a kick out of it when some poor fumbling Sparks aboard a tramp has to ask for a repeat. Gives you a superior feeling; and you repeat at a painful fifteen or twenty, just to show the chap—and anybody else who may be listening—what a patient wonder you are. It's a game called 'roasting' that every operator knows.

"I remember when the first German liner appeared in these waters after the war. We had a young chap here like Sargent, just out of the navy and full of hot steam and ginger. We had a few messages for the German and our boy had a fine time roasting the ears off the German's junior op. The chap kept asking for repeats, and finally our wonder boy cracked off 'Get another op.' That's the ultimate insult in this business, you understand. Well, the German fetched his chief, who turned out to be an old hand at the game. He copied our messages all right and then announced he had some stuff for retransmission to New York. His apparatus was one of those Telefunken outfits that warble like a canary, and he had something like two hundred messages, nearly all in German.

"He screwed down his key to the least possible working gap and he zipped those messages at our hero in bunches of ten, going a blue streak. Clannett—the wonder boy—was sweating blood inside five minutes. He couldn't use the station typewriter because the signals weren't loud enough, so it was pencil and pad, with a duplicate to be made for every message, a carbon

sheet to be whipped into place for each new message, and the completed messages to be torn off and marked with the time of receipt—and all that with the German sailing straight on at about thirty words a minute. I know, because I was here in the room and so was Matt, and we plugged in to hear the German's side of the game. The air was quiet. You could sense dozens of other chaps, ship and shore, listening in—because everyone knew what was up.

"At the end of the fourth or fifth group Clinnett had to ask for a repeat—a signature here, a word or two there. At the end of the seventh he was asking for whole phrases. You could fairly see the German grinning. And then it came, a curt little service message in perfect English, addressed to the O-in-C, Marina, demanding 'Please use capable operator.' There was dead silence in the phones for a moment, and then you could hear ships up and down the coast piping '*Hi-hi-hi*'—the signal for a laugh. And the laugh was on us, on Marina, you see. Matt was furious, with Clinnett as much as the Hun."

"What happened?" Isabel asked.

"Matt took over the watch himself, tapping out 'O.I.C. here' in his slow way and telling the Hun to go on with his messages in groups of ten. By that time everyone on the coast had stopped to listen, for they all knew Carney's fist—and they knew what was coming next. A lot of smart ship ops have been fooled by that fist of Matt's. They think they've got a slow chum at the other end of the line and they screw down their keys and try to roast him. Well, Matt's been in this game so long that the code's his native language—he *thinks* in dots and dashes. And nothing bothers him—interference, static, speed—nothing. He can read the stuff by instinct, and faster than any human hand could send it. Everyone on the coast knew that, but the German didn't and away he went like greased lightning with his next ten messages.

"At the end of them Matt gave him 'R' for the lot, and added 'Send faster.' The German zipped off another group; and again Matt said 'Send faster.' The Hun was good, mind you; he was sending as fast as any man could go. But he couldn't keep up that pace. His wrist was getting tired. When he tried to cram on a bit more speed it was fatal. He began to make mistakes, falling all over himself, going back and repeating. Another

group, and Matt cracked off, in that same slow fist, mind you. 'Send much faster. Have other traffic to clear.' There was a pause, and the German came on again, going at a terrific rate. But when he got to the third or fourth message in the group he stumbled badly, went back and repeated, zipped on for a bit, and stumbled again.

"At the end of the group it was rather pitiful—like watching a good penman ruin his fist by trying to write too fast. And of course there was nothing the German could do or say about the speed—he was dealing with a shore station, and a shore station in its own official range is practically the Almighty; its word is law. By the time he got to his twelfth group the Hun was stumbling and fumbling, making a stuttering mess of it; and then Matt put an end to it, tapping out in his calm way, slow and merciless like the cold wrath of God, 'Use recognized code or get someone who can.'

"You should have heard the chorus in the phones—every op in the area snickering out '*Hi-hi-hi*.' Even Clinnett laughed, standing there beside Matt with a pair of phones plugged in. And then in the silence before the German's junior op came on again, sending at Matt's own rate, a bit over twenty, no more, Matt got out of the chair and motioned Clinnett towards the pencil and the message pads. 'Take over,' he said. 'And after this don't act the damned fool at my key.' Can't you hear him saying that?"

"Yes," Isabel said. "My key, my station, my island—they're all his, really, aren't they? How that would touch his pride! But it all sounds a bit childish, if you'll forgive me—like a lot of little boys showing off and giggling in a crowded room. I thought this was a serious business."

Skane grinned. "It is, most of the time. That's why we like a bit of fun now and then."

"Something to do!"

He glanced at her curiously. "You don't like that expression, do you?"

"No. But I'm beginning to see the point. That's why I want to be able to do twenty-five on that key."

He chuckled. "Anyone would think you intend to take a watch."