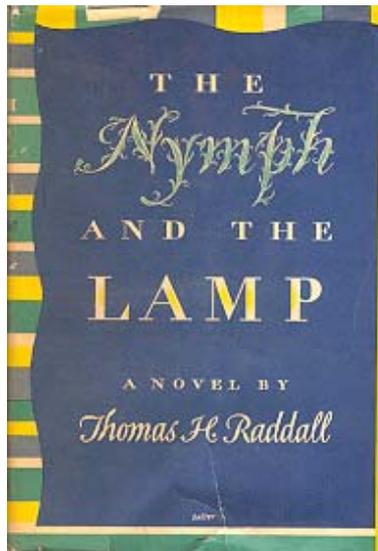


EXTRACTS FROM "THE NYMPH AND THE LAMP" BY THOMAS RADDALL.



THE ISLAND CALLED "MARINA" IN THE BOOK IS ACTUALLY "SABLE ISLAND" - WHICH IS 300 MILES SOUTH OF CANSCO, NOVA SCOTIA.

THOMAS RADDALL WAS STATIONED THERE AT MARCONI RADIO STATION VCT IN THE 1920'S FOR ABOUT A YEAR. THE STORY IS LOOSELY BASED UPON HIS EXPERIENCE THERE, AND SOME OF THE PEOPLE MENTIONED IN THE BOOK ARE BASED ON REAL PEOPLE, BUT THE EVENTS ARE CHANGED, THINGS SPICED UP AS AFTER ALL, THIS IS A BOOK OF FICTION. ISABEL IS A SECRETARY AT THE MARCONI DEPOT IN HALIFAX WHO IS THOUGHT TO BE VERY STUFFY AND A PERSON WHO IS "NO FUN" BUT THROUGH A SERIES OF EVENTS, SHE MEETS MATHEW WHO IS ON SHORE LEAVE FROM MARINA ISLAND, AND LEAVES WITH HIM ON YET ANOTHER CHANGE OF EVENTS. MATHEW IS THE OIC - OPERATOR-IN-CHARGE OF MARINA RADIO. THERE ARE SEVERAL OTHER OPERATORS THERE ALSO AND THEY PROVIDE A 24 HOUR A DAY, 7 DAYS A WEEK RADIO WATCH ON 600 METERS (500 KILOCYCLES OR KILOHERTZ).



THIS TEXT WAS WRITTEN IN "TELEGRAPHER'S MILL" FONT AVAILABLE ELSEWHERE ON THE INTERNET. IT WAS THE FONT THAT THE TELEGRAPHERS USED BECAUSE IT WAS ALL UPPERCASE. LOCATION OF SABLE ISLAND CLOSE UP OF SABLE I.

THE WIRELESS STATION WAS IN THE THICKER MIDDLE PART OF THE ISLAND. IT WAS ABANDONED AROUND 1940 - JUST PRIOR TO WW2.

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On the coastal stations, where there was a good deal of interstation traffic, each operator became known to the others by his "hand", his style, the color of his personality flung on the mind-screens of the others by the mere contact of his fingers on the transmitting key.

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In the early days radio work had a dreamlike quality that grew upon a man. As late as 1910, when Carney went to Marina, there was nothing to do but sit for hours with a pair of heavy old-fashioned phones clasped on his head, listening intently in a void. Sometimes for the benefit of new operators who took the modern traffic as a matter of course [Carney] liked to recall those days.

"Only a few ships were fitted, you know, before the Titanic went down. The shipowners considered it a fad. It cost a lot of money and it didn't work very well. Aboard ship you were a bit of a joke, a fellow wearing an officer's uniform who sailed the sea in a chair, sitting in a cubbyhole and playing with knobs and electric sparks. That was what they called you, Sparks, and they grinned and told you how useless you were, you and your silly box of tricks. Oh, it was hard to keep your faith in it, sometimes. You'd sit, watch after watch, hearing nothing but static, and every half-hour solemnly cracking off CQ-CQ-CQ with your spark - like yelling 'Hey ,Mac!' down a drainpipe in the dark. If you got a reply it gave you quite a start. Your fingers would tremble on the key. You'd muddle your dots and dashes a bit. You felt like one of those old prophets in a desert somewhere, talking to Jehovah."

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Carney had been at the Marina key when the Titanic struck ice and went down like a punctured can. He talked about that a good deal. The Titanic affair had made tremendous change. After that Sparks got a grudging respect aboard ship, he was even a hero for a time. Before the fuss died down governments had passed laws, and shipowners had to install the mysterious apparatus whether they liked it or not. By 1914 the sea air was alive with dot-and-dash talk. Then came the German war and there fell another silence, weird and different, prickling with the strain of all those taut men listening about the sea; a silence so intense that it hurt, relieved now and then by some ship, attacked and desperate, flicking a scrabble of letters and figures across the void; or a short station, solemn and purposeful like the voice of God, pouring out a stream of mysterious cipher and stopping with the final click of a water tap shut off.

When you put on the phones it was as if your inner self stepped out of the bored and weary flesh and left it sitting in the chair in that barren room. For a space you were part of another world, the real, the actual living world of men and ships and ports, in which Marina was nothing but a sandbar and a trio of call letters in the signal books. Whistling, growling, squealing, moaning, here were the voices of men transmuted through their finger tips, issuing in dots and dashes, speaking twenty languages in one clear universal code, flinging what they had to say across the enormous spaces of the sea.

Here were the Americans with their quenched-spark sets, the high flute notes; and British tramps with their synchronous-rotaries, their hoarse baritone whose tune was halfway down the scale; the Canadians and their high wailing rotaries; the curious musical pop-pop-popping of the Germans with their Telefunkens, the French tramps and trawlers bleating like small sheep lost in the green wet pastures of the sea, and their liners crying out in a quick precise tenor to the shore; the harsh scream of the occasional Japs, whose names were all something-Maru, jamming the six-hundred-meter wave with their infernal five-kilowatt sparks for an hour at a time, oblivious of international regulations; the quick, jerky piping of the Italians; the ringing manly-bosun tones of the Norwegians, the Swedes and the Danes.

All these sparks bellowed, cried, muttered or whispered together on the six-hundred-meter wave, the main channel for ship traffic. At night when the darkness increased their range by three, four or five times the uproar was terrific, the sound of a vast swamp on a spring night filled with vociferous frogs. By day the range and the Babel subsided; but there was seldom quiet. Ships talked to each other, or they demanded notice from the shore, crying the attention of New York or Boston or Cape Race or Marina, that outpost which could pluck messages far out of the ocean air and fling them on to the landline at Halifax. To wireless operators on the North Atlantic run these stations, known indifferently by name but intimately by their call signals - NAH, BF, VCE, VAT - these were the tongues and ears of North America, the listening posts, the speaking trumpets of the continent.

The great liners with their tall masts and powerful transmitters bestrode the ocean, hurling messages now to one side, now the other. These were the prima donnas of the show, with strong clear voices sheering through the boom and trill of the chorus, uttering a few clipped notes here and there, and then bursting forth in long arias addressed to London, Paris or New York. Their voices rang about the wide sea spaces and all the others shrank to a murmur. But when the last cadenza died in a final dot or dash the chorus rose once more, the vast tramp-navy, the rabble of the sea, insistent and tumultuous, demanding the notice of each other or of some distant station on the land.

In all this medley there were certain sounds that had special meaning. Your own call signal first; but that was burned into your mind with letters of fire so that, waking or dozing in a dull watch, or reading or writing or pottering with the dials, its merest whisper brought you erect and alert in the chair, reaching out for pencil and message pad. There was CQ, the anonymous call that might mean anybody, the constant "Hey Mac!" of the groping tramps. There was QST, the general call to all stations, ship and shore, which usually had to do with navigation warnings, icebergs or derelicts in the lanes, and suchlike matters, But most significant was a simple group of dots and dashes that for convenience were written SOS, although it could have been VTB or any combination of letters involving three dots, three dashes and three dots, all run together without pause. This was the magic symbol by which all the frogs in the great sea-swamp could be hushed in a minute. For every operator, even for cynics like Skane and old hands like Carney, that sound never lost its thrill, its quick clutch at the heart.

Usually the cry came from some foundering tramp, one still small voice in the uproar, barely heard by one or two ships on the edge of its range. But those ships spoke quickly, urgently, and were heard by the nearest shore station, the traffic policeman whose voice was law, Then a lonely man at the key of some outpost like Marina sent a trumpet call ringing through Babel like the voice of God, calling QST - "All Stations" - and demanding silence, adding in a swift flicker of dots and dashes "STD BI FOR SOS". Silence fell within his range, and on the edge of it other shore stations took up the cry, and it went up and down the coast. Here and there a small ship-voice, uncomprehending, uttered a call or went on with some petty business; but then a shore station or nearby ship cut in with a savage QRT - "Shut up!"

When this took place at night, with its enlarged range, the great silence spread like an infection all the way from Labrador to Florida, and you felt in that enormous emptiness hundreds of alert men on the coast and in the ships, listening, waiting, straining to catch the voice of distress...It was magnificent - all the traffic, all the urgent business of that vast reach of sea and seaboard held up and silenced because, somewhere in the darkness, a few men were in peril.

Then out of the void that still small voice again, uttering dots and dashes on a small auxiliary set because the engine room was flooded and the main dynamo dead, crying faintly the name of a ship, sinking, latitude so-and-so, longitude so-and-so. Silence again, Then the shore trumpet ring out, repeating, flinging over the wet wilderness that brief appeal. And again silence. You could imagine, yes, you could see the operators in the ships, talking to the bridge by telephone, or running up there with the figures jotted on a message form; and you could see the officers of the watch, the smart liner-officers in blue and brass, the unkempt mates of tramps, the grim skippers aroused from their berths,

the heads together under chartroom lamps, the stalking legs of brass dividers , the slither of black parallel-rulers, the pencil calculations and jottings; and you could hear the rumbling voices - "Sparks? Here's out position and speed" - "Five hours" - "Twelve hours" - "Sorry, we can't do him any good, we're four hundred miles to the east" - "Heavy sea from the nor'ard here, anyone nearer?" - "Make it by daylight, weather holding" - "What's their wind, can you get their wind? If they take to the boats they'll drift."

Dots-and-dashes in the phones again. Ships reporting position. A stride to the chart on the station wall. Nearest? This one. But he's only a tramp doing seven knots - poor coal, probably. Next one's a tanker doing close to twelve - says he's got a heavy cross-sea on that bearing but can make it. But here's a liner doing twenty, farther off than the others of course, but her could be there in less time. So many hours. Um! Chances are the ship'll be down before that, Case of looking for boats. Head all three of 'em for it, then. That other chap, too, and the Yankee trawler. We can turn 'em back again if the liner does the trick.

Back to the key. The trumpet blaring. Situation thus-and-so. Suggest this, suggest that. ("Never Command," Carney would say. "Remember, you control all wireless traffic in your area but you can't command the skippers. By Jingo, nobody commands a skipper but his owners and his conscience - and you've got no time to contact owners when a ship's going under.") From there on you sat silent, hearing the cross-talk of the rescuing ships. When all was working properly you notified the rest of the coast that traffic could be resumed. At once the swamp came back to life, but with one conspicuous spot of calm in the area of the ship in distress. There nobody talked but the ships concerned, and you stood by ready to snap at any ham-handed fool who interfered.

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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, Matthew 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"

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 "MC" —that's "Olympia" — where the ops are top notch. 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, Clinnett—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 'OIC 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'tt 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 saving 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."

=30=