



## THE LONER

Ray Green D

I have been feeling very unhappy these past months account of something that happened in my seagoing life, let's think, it is almost nine months now. We are many days out of Beaumont, Texas oil fields and enroute to Tenerife in the Canary Islands thence to Alexandria, Port Said, Haifa. Anyway, here I sit, brooding and quite melancholy in the fading daylight. The old tanker is plodding along about eight knots an hour. We are deep loaded as we are sailing in the favorable months of the year for this portion of the earth's seas.

The saloon lights were snapped on and in came the second mate. He was headed for the pantry for the usual snack, coffee on tap at all hours. "Sparks", he said, "What in the hell is the matter with you, you mope around this ship like a ghost, don't talk to anybody, stick up in your wireless shack day in and day out. We hardly see you except at meal time and even then you never say a word." About this time the first assistant engineer came in. The mate said to him, "What are you doing up here first?" Very seldom do the engineering officers come forward other than meal time; they live way astern with their engines. "Oh," he said, "I have some paper work to talk over with the chief mate and Captain." Said the mate, "Well, I was giving sparks hell about his moping all the time. You know something? He is a regular loner--introvert." "Yes," said the engineer. "I have noticed that. Sparks, what's eating you?" "Plenty," I said. "Something that happened several months ago." "Well, tell us about it. Get it off your chest." I settled back debating if I should unburden my mind and heart. Yes, I think I will.

Well, it's like this, fellows. Several months ago I was Sparks or Marconi man on a half freighter, half passenger ship and we were up in the Newfoundland banks in the iceberg season of the year. The Captain asked me to try and contact some ship ahead of us for weather. We seemed to be in fog all the time and passed many large chunks of ice, not actually icebergs but growlers or drifting ice. So I went up to the wireless shack and opened up my little quarter kilowatt transmitter. You know those sets are not very powerful and the spark note is rough. I started calling for a ship around me but all I could hear was the powerful signals of the big transatlantic liners--especially a big ship, brand new on her maiden voyage across the Atlantic.

Everybody was paying attention to her powerful wireless rig and the other big liners were talking back and forth to her. They all seemed very happy and proud to get even a slight acknowledgement from her, such was the importance of the situation.

I continued at intervals to call for some other freighter, especially our sister ship coming from the United States. I threw the send, receive switch to receive after a long call and in boomed the big liner and did he tell me what to do. So and So shut up and shut down. You are causing interference with our traffic handling. Let this be a warning. If you come on again, we will report you to the home office for license suspension and loss of your ship. I threw the switch and answered with a weak unsteady mild tiny spark, "Yes, sir." I heard many wise remarks passed by ships around us. By around I mean a radius of several hundred miles. I shut down and told the Captain about it. I hung the receiver on the hook and I did not go near the set again. Occasionally I could hear the big ship. His signals were so powerful they made the head set sing out. Finally I guess he either cleared all his traffic or shifted to another wave length. I settled in my bunk and read a story and finally dropped off to sleep still smouldering under my collar from the snippy calling down the big ship gave me. I dreamed how nice it must be to be a Marconi operator on such a grand ship with a fancy uniform and good meals in the dining room, plenty of music and pretty ladies around. Oh, boy, and how!

Well, the freighter was making very slow progress through the ice or better say drift ice and dense fog, blowing its fog horn or whistle every thirty seconds. It was an eerie night, damp and cold. You could hear the chunks of ice hit the hull of the ship and slide along the entire side, bumping hard at times. We were going very slow so no damage was done other than scraping some paint off.

"So what happened, Sparks? Go on," said the mate. He and the engineer were quite interested.

Well, about 2 a.m. or so the speaking tube blew its whistle from the bridge and the second mate said, "Marconi, come up on the bridge a minute." I put on my warm coat and went up to the bridge. All was normal--dense fog still prevailed but the helmsman was standing before the binnacle. The wheelhouse darkened only the compass card and the reflection of the starboard and port lights in the mist was to be seen. The mate said, "Have you been listening on the wireless lately?" I said, "No, not after that call down I got from the big liner." "Well," he said, "look over there. I imagined I saw some sort of faint light burn for a few seconds, then go out. I saw it a couple

times more. It can't be any aurora borealis on a night like this, fog all around but clear overhead." I looked hard but saw nothing. "Well," he said, "If it happens again, I am going to call the Captain." I went back to my bunk.

It was not very long before I awoke with a start. There was much loud talk, even yelling going on up on the bridge. I went out on the boat deck and could dimly see the mate and the captain. The captain was calling a-hoy through the megaphone. I could just make them out in the heavy fog and the glow of the running lights. I stared out abeam but could see nothing but a gray wall of dense fog. Yet, yes, I am sure I heard it--a faint answer to the captain's call. He also heard it and called again. Then I heard the engine room bells to slow down or stop engines. They slowed way down, then another ring and they stopped. We were drifting now, very quietly except for occasional bumping of ice against the side. We were coming to a dead stop, losing all headway. It got much quieter and the captain called again and sure enough a faint a-hoy was heard. There was much action on the bridge. Suddenly the captain was standing beside me, glowering at me, and demanding to know what I was doing out here on the boat deck when I should be in the wireless room listening for whatever that answering a-hoy was. I meekly retreated to the operating room, put on the headphones and scanned all the wave lengths, especially the distress wave. Then I decided to disconnect the magnetic detector and replace it with a piece of silicon, my old cat whisker detector, strictly against the rules of the service account patent problems higher up. It worked so much better.

I listened to Land's End England, his call letters MPD, Poldhu. I could hear signals. I guess they were his but I was unable to read them. Then I shifted to South Well fleet MCC on Cape Cod, Maddachusetts. I could hear his musical note or drone but was still unable to read these stations on account of heavy static prevailing. I guess we were about mid-ocean up in the Grand Banks some place. Then I returned to the six hundred meters for possible SOS traffic. I heard quite a good signal from one of the ocean liners talking to a similar large deluxe ship. They were exchanging the course and speed messages. Nothing was said about any trouble. I listened around a little longer but was unable to pick up anything that indicated a disaster. They were merely exchanging longitude and latitude.

I was afraid to open up for fear of the big ship really stomping down on me again. Then I went outside the wireless cabin and looked over the side. There was much excitement. There was a lifeboat towing or tied to two others and they were loaded with people--seamen, women, men and even the shrill voices of

children. They looked so huddled and bent with exposure. I immediately grew excited. It was not long before most of the occupants of these boats were hauled on board our humble little freighter and soon the word reached me via one of the apprentices that they were the survivors of the giant new liner. Their stories were all jumbled up.

Started up my small powered spark transmitter and gave the general call. Immediately one of those large proud liners I had heard previously pounced on me with many questions. I gave him our location, that is the last one the captain had given to me. Had we seen anything of the great liner in distress and many other questions. I told him to stand by a minute and hurried to the bridge. What a sight I saw. There was the Captain in the chart room questioning a junior ship's officer who looked like he was half frozen and the story was soon made clear.

The great ship had gently slipped up on something, like going on a sand bar, according to this junior officer. A slight list was experienced but the ship kept going and slid along this seemingly smooth sandbar, probably an ice ledge of a berg, without much noise and then slipped back into deep water again. Nobody thought much about it but it seems considerable damage had been done to the outer hull of this double hulled ship. After an investigation it turned out to be of a semi-serious nature so they thought at the time.

Well, the Captain gave the man a good stiff drink and turned away. As he did so he saw me and said, "Marconi, call out and try to find out what you can." I gave him what information I had received from the other liners and he wrote out a message for me to the effect that we were picking up life boats and rafts from the great ship and rescuing many passengers, that many dead were floating around in the water and that he was directing his boat crews to pick up as many bodies as they could find in the dense fog. They were bringing them aboard and laying them in rows on the well deck. Other boats were bringing in live survivors. Soon we had one big confused mass of shivering half frozen people and the stewards were pumping all the hot coffee in them they could and whisky in the more needy ones. It was terrifying to see them and the wild look in their eyes.

I went back to the wireless room and gave the ships around us, which I guess by now were many, what the captain said. Then each ship reported his position, distance and expected arrival time at our location. All of which I took up to the bridge. The captain glanced at them but he was so busy with the stark

tragedy before him he kept right on issuing orders to get all the life-boats adrift gathered together and to go after more of them. Dawn was coming up but we were still in dense fog and ice was floating in large chunks all around us. Then the Captain assigned two of the apprentices and me to the task of visiting each rescued person and getting his name and address, specially his name. Soon we had a long list of several hundred and turned them over to the Captain. He sent for me and instructed me to get them all ready in order to prepare myself to send them to the shore stations or one of the big liners nearby with bigger and better equipment to relay ashore for me. This I did. In the meantime the big liners with all their ego and authority were demanding more and closer attention to my equipment and staying on the job, that is keeping the head phones on. They did this in no uncertain sarcastic manner. I meekly obeyed but told the Captain the situation so he assigned one of the apprentices to the wireless cabin to run errands.

I called the closest liner and said I was ready to send him part of the list of rescued names. Could he relay them ashore with his higher powered set? After a somewhat nasty remark I began to send the names. I would stop every ten names and ask how I was doing. I was told my sending was rotten and to repeat this and that name and resume. So this went on for many hours. Suddenly, much to my surprise, a fine signal boomed in. It was Sciasconset, Mass. He said he had been copying me direct, that I should go ahead with all the rest of the communications to him. He also told me he had a mountain pile of messages for me. So I started in and for the next three days and nights I struggled along with this fine station. Of course there were several relief operators there but still I was all alone.

There I sat with my head resting on my hand, pumping away with the list of names before me. Gosh, I was tired and the poor operators at Siasconset struggling with me only as real telegraph men can do. We struggled--over and over, repeat and repeat--and the static was bothering us although he had a fine signal and note. I can imagine the struggle he was having copying my poor straight spark gap transmitter with its raspy note almost like static itself. But I would faithfully repeat his requests and he was loaded with messages for me and I could see I would never make it.

We had rescued one of the Marconi operators from the great liner. He was the junior operator. He was badly frost bitten as he had gone overboard and had floated in the icy waters for quite some time before he was hauled into one of the life boats. He had finally made it up to the wireless cabin. A real delicate chap, he tried to relieve me but was unable to control his

sending fist or hand so I resumed the grind hour after hour. Those loyal operators at Siasconset stayed with me. After a long session they would say to me, "Take it easy, take a rest. Resume when you can. We are right here to copy you." The kindness and encouragement of those shore operators was a great comfort to me.

I made a trip down among the rescued to get corrections in their names, some of which I could not read. The junior operator was lying on the seasette.

I resumed transmitting but as far as sending long press stories or long private messages, it was out of the question. I talked to the junior operator from time to time. As far as he knew they never did establish communication with America or England. They waited too long and the only word they managed to get out was to one other large vessel and he was several hundred miles away but did spread the alarm.

I guess we were the lucky or should I say unlucky ones to happen to be in the vicinity near the accident. My heart went out to those rescued, both passengers and crew alike. They looked so beat, most of them frost bitten, but I had no time to waste or to stand there being sorry. I partly listened to their stories about the last minutes of confusion, but hurried back to the wireless room and resumed my sending to the shore station. He was the only station I was tuned to and I did not attempt to shift wave lengths. After three days and two nights my signals seemed to get better to him and we made better progress but I was worn out. My eyes were heavy lidded and my head would dip forward, only to cause me to snap it back up with alarm. Finally he asked me to listen for New York. I did so and heard him fine. I followed his instructions and soon I was saying goodbye and thanking the Siasconset operators. They complimented me with, "Fine job, sonny."

The New York station overwhelmed me with his fine fast snappy operating ("Dave" Sarnoff). His code was perfect. I was worn out and had to slow him down. This he did with grace and encouragement. I continued the list of names, completed it and then started the trying job of copying some messages, mostly requests to the Captain for press stories. But he only sent a few crisp short messages to our company officials. Soon Scotland light ship was in sight and many small boats were crowded around us. The news men were frantic in their behaviour. They climbed on board and our Captain and crew did not have much power to prevent them from filtering right in among the rescued with pad and pencil, getting their stories. Then many of them rushed up to the wireless room and demanded that I send their stories to their various news agencies.

I refused and in return received a lot of abusive language. Those press reporters were a merciless crowd. My orders from the Captain were to send nothing that did not have his indorsement on it and you can imagine how much he indorsed.

Finally we were up and docking and I closed down with the fine New York operator. Soon it seemed half of New York police department was on board establishing peace and order.

I had a last talk with the junior Marconi operator and he repeated that as far as he knew the great shi never did establish communication with England or America. In fact, the jolt was so gentle, even if disasterous, it caused the delay in the sending of the distress call. By the time it actually was sent only one liner happened to be listening. In fact he suggested it was press time and maybe they were all up copying press at the time. Of course I was not on the air so did not get the first call for reasons I have previously stated.

Well, there is not much to tell you guys that you have not already read in the papers but what makes me so gloomy and introvert is all the fuss that was kicked up after we finally arrived in New York City. I was called on the carpet in the wireless office and third degreed from first to last. All kinds of criticism was found of me. I was not even permitted a few hours rest but stood before the swivel chair magnets or landlubbers and took the third degree. Why didn't I do this, why didn't I do that, what was I doing when, where was I when so and so.

Finally I was dismissed in disgrace and felt pretty bad about it all. Not even the Captain found it in his heart and his acclaim to throw me a kindly word. I was removed from my ship berth and placed at the bottom of the list for reassignment as incompetent.

"Gosh, Sparks, that's a tough story. Sure we have all read the accounts and they are still very hazy as to what happened. There sure were a lot of famous people on that ship," said the mate.

Now that it is all over and fast beginning to be forgotten what further bothers me is all these amateur wireless operators and all these professional operators who are writing newspaper articles and magazine stories. How they heard the great ship direct, they were the first ones to report the accident. I still believe what the Junior Marconi operator said that the ship never contacted anybody ashore on either side of the Atlantic direct. In fact, the first word of the accident after the last emergency

call from the ship herself was from my wireless room. But here I sit in disgrce and everybody else is a hero. I only have a good word for the boys at Siaconset. They are the only ones who could read between my wavering dots and dashes and static how tired out I was after five days and four nights of operating.

So do not try and make me feel happy. I am the victim of a lousy trick of fate. "Sparks," said the Engineer, "Do you mean to tell us no other station or any other shore station had communication with the big ship other than those two other transatlantic liners who you said you heard exchanging positions and courses?"

"As far as I know, yes."

"Well, gee, according to the papers one operator in New York City worked and cleared all the traffic and then there were several amateurs down along the New England coast who claim they heard the distress calls, and some over in England and other parts of Europe. Maybe you are wrong about it all."

"Well, I could be but as far as I know and I was pretty close to the entire terrible disaster, my ship was the first to pick up any of the boats and rafts and my captain was the first on the scene or near it. The other liners arrived many hours later and picked up a few odds and ends, mostly bodies. Maybe a few survivors who had drifted far away from the actual scene. During all the activity the fog never lifted and the ice also was a great problem. But as far as all this talk about this and that wireless operator working the ship and getting the news direct, I have my doubts. The first names came through via me to the large transatlantic liner on its way to us and when Siasconset said we hear you fine, go ahead direct, I worked nobody else until he shifted me to the New York Station. But all I got was hell for everything I did and how I did it, and as I have told you I was put on the bottom of the list. Here I am eating my heart out, not even an honorable mention, not even a defense put up by my captain--just forgotten in all his glory and I condemned. So you fellows do not have to brand me a loner, a sulker. I want to be alone, I want to pick my friends and I do not intend to smile and butter up every person I meet just to be called a swell fellow. So I'm going up to the wireless room to get the weather ahead and see how things are. Good luck to you guys and stop looking at me and talking to me as if I was some kind of crazy person. I am quite normal I assure you. Good night.

--Ray Green