

CHAPTER 1

Message in Morse

“Who has sent it to you, Tom?” asked his mother.

“Mark, I think,” said Tom. “The handwriting on the envelope seems to be his. But the letter is a series of dots and dashes.”

“Show me,” said his mother. Tom brought the letter over to where she was sitting.

“I think it’s Morse code,” she said. “You’ll have to find a Morse chart and decode it.”

“Daddy’s got one,” said Tom. “I’m sure I’ve seen one in his book on cruising in the Den. Will he mind if I borrow it?”

“Not if you are careful with it,” she said. Tom went up the stairs to his father’s study. He was looking for a book of his father’s, a favourite, about cruising in sailing boats. The back screen door opened with a tortured squeak. “I’m home, Mummy. They didn’t have Billy tea you wanted so I got Lan Choo instead.”

“Never mind, Cate,” said her mother. “Put it on the kitchen table. Where’s Bill?”

“He stayed behind at the Brown’s. He said he wouldn’t be long. Where’s Pumpkin?” Cate asked in her turn.

“She’s playing with Julie in the sandpit,” replied her mother. Tom came downstairs with the volume he had been seeking. “Cate, I’ve had a letter from Mark in Morse code,” he grinned. “Come and give me a hand to translate it.”

“Not in the kitchen,” said his mother. “I’m about to get lunch.” The two went into the room where they did their lessons and sat side by side at one of the desks. They looked at the coded letter.

“How do you know it’s from Mark?” Cate asked.

“The writing on the envelope is his. It must be from him.” Tom had opened the book he had brought down from his father’s library at a

chapter entitled *Flags and signalling*. “Look here’s the Morse code chart.”

ALPHABET		
A ---	J - - - - -	S - - -
B - - - - -	K - - - -	T - -
C - - - - -	L - - - -	U - - -
D - - - -	M - - -	V - - - -
E - -	N - - -	W - - - -
F - - - - -	O - - - -	X - - - -
G - - - -	P - - - -	Y - - - -
H - - - -	Q - - - -	Z - - - -
I - -	R - - - -	STOP - - - - -
NUMERALS		
1 - - - - -	6 - - - - -	
2 - - - - -	7 - - - - -	
3 - - - - -	8 - - - - -	
4 - - - - -	9 - - - - -	
5 - - - - -	0 - - - - -	

“You read out the message and I’ll look at the chart,” said Cate. “And I’ll write down the letters as we identify them,” he responded.

“First there is a single dash.”

“T”, said Cate after a short search.

“Three dashes in a row,” said Tom.

“O”, said Cate.

“Two dashes.”

“M. Well we know its addressed to you, anyway. That’s progress.”

“Dash, dot, two dashes,” responded Tom.

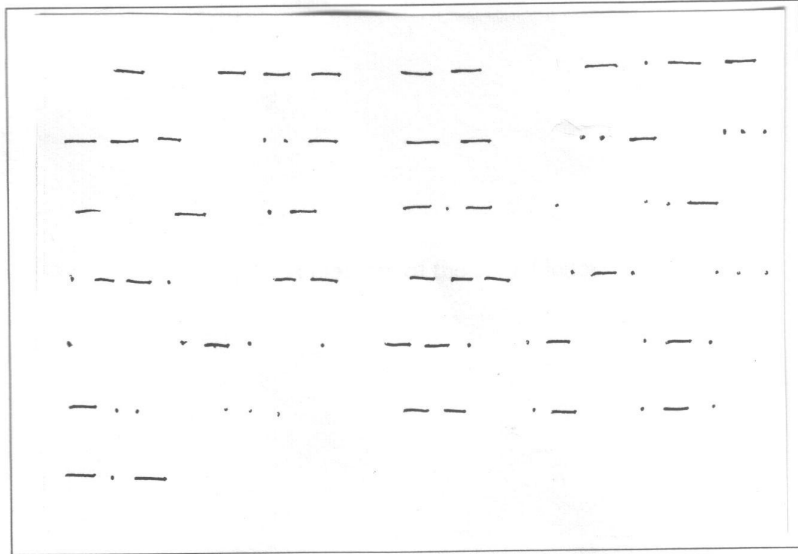
Cate took a little longer over this request. “Got it—Y,” she said at last.

“Three dashes again.”

“O.”

“Two dots and a dash.”

“U,” said Cate.



They proceeded for another five minutes or so until they had the full message which read: “*Tom you must take up Morse regards Mark.*”

“We’ll *all* take it up,” said Cate looking at her brother with a grin. Tom read on in his father’s book. “‘The advantage of Morse,’ it says here, ‘is that you can use it in all sorts of ways,’” he said. “You can sound it on a horn or whistle it, tap it out or flash it on a torch after dark.”

“And write it in a letter,” said Cate.

“It also says that it is easier to use the words ‘dit’ and ‘dah’ instead of dot and dash when you are describing it,” he said.

“That’s what it would sound like, too, if you were signalling on a horn.”

Bill came into the room just then. “What are you doing?” he asked the others.

“Tom has got a letter from Mark in Morse code,” said his sister, “and we have just translated it. Look.” Bill leant over the table and read the translation to himself. ‘Tom you must take up Morse regards Mark’.

“Are you going to, Tom?” he asked looking up.

“We’re all going to learn it,” said Cate.

“Hi! Lunch, you children,” their mother called from the kitchen.

“When?” asked Bill.

“After lunch,” replied Tom.

Mary Rose, the children’s little sister, and Julie, the little girl from next door, were already sitting at the kitchen table as the three elder children came into the kitchen.

“Hello Pumpkin. Hello Julie,” said Cate. “What have you two been up to?”

“Ina sanpit,” said Mary Rose.

“Paing Tars!” said Julie.

“Cars, she means,” said Bill drawing up a chair.

“Here are your sandwiches,” said Mrs Ryan placing two large plates of sandwiches on the table. “No Bill. Wait,” she said as Bill made to take a sandwich. “We’ll say Grace first.”

“Bless us O Lord and these Thy gifts . . .” the elder children intoned with their mother while Mary Rose watched them and imitated their actions. Julie was, as usual, puzzled by this ceremony which always preceded the important business of eating lunch in the Ryan household. The children blessed themselves at the end of the short prayer. “Tom. Will you bring over the teapot?” said Mrs Ryan as the children commenced to eat. “And Cate, the cups.” Tom carried the teapot to the table.

“Here’s what Mark’s message says,” he said passing his mother the translation. “I am going to work out a reply and send it to him.”

“We’re all going to learn Morse code,” said Cate putting the cups down on the table. “As soon as lunch is over.”

“It’s a good thing you are having a free day today,” said Mrs Ryan looking at them meaningfully. “It ‘ll be back to the grind tomorrow.”

“Now, we must first make out copies of the code,” said Cate after lunch was over and she and the two boys had returned to the school room, “and then we will each have a copy and won’t have to keep borrowing Daddy’s book.”

“Let’s sit down now and copy it out,” said Tom. They got some paper and sat together at the desk.

“I’ll call each one out,” said Tom “and we’ll write them down.”

“And when we have finished we can check that we have them right.”

“Let’s rule up the page so it is just like the chart in the book,” said Bill.

“A brilliant idea, Bill,” said Tom. “Has anyone seen the ruler?”

“It’s over here,” said Bill fetching it from the other desk. They ruled three pages up so as to set out the alphabet in three columns and the numerals in two columns below.

“What too doong?” came a small voice from the doorway.

“We’re writing up Morse code, Pumpkin,” said Tom.

“Get a chair Mary Rose and you can sit on that side and watch,” said Cate. “Where’s Julie?”

“Don home,” said Mary Rose. Bill dragged a chair over to the desk for her and, with difficulty, Mary Rose climbed up, knelt on it and gazed on the handiwork of her three heroes.

“Write out all the letters and numerals first,” said Tom. “Then we’ll only have to put in the code.” So they wrote down the letters of the alphabet in the top three columns and the numbers in the bottom two.

“There’s no number ten,” said Bill.

“Yes there is, silly,” said Cate. “You just signal one and nought together.”

“Oh. Of course.”

“Now. Are you ready?” asked Tom. “A—dit dah.”

“Dit dah?” said Bill.

“Yes. It’s short for ‘dot dash’.”

“Doesn’t seem very short to me,” said Bill.

“Don’t argue with your elders and betters, Bill,” said Cate.

“Dit dah,” said Mary Rose. They all wrote against A on the chart a dot and a dash.

“B—dah dit dit dit,” said Tom...

After ten minutes or so they had the whole of the alphabet and the numerals written down on each of their charts. They then went over them together to ensure they all agreed with the code in their father’s book and with what each had written down.

“Now,” said Tom. “Let’s each work out a message and try and send it to the others by tapping.”

“How will we know a dot from a dash?” asked Cate.

“Or a dit from a dah for that matter?” said Bill.

“The sound made by the flat of the ruler hitting the desk can be a dash and the sound made by the edge will be a dot.”

“Let’s try it,” said Cate.

“So SOS will sound like this,” said Tom and he demonstrated by tapping with the ruler—*dit dit dit dah dah dah dit dit dit*. The time he allowed for each dash was longer than for each of the dots. “The book says that the length of each dash is equivalent to three dots so we will have to be careful not only to sound each dash but to do it more slowly than for dots.”

Cate was busy writing out a message and looking at her chart to transcribe it into Morse. “Can I go first?” she asked.

They very soon learned that it was comparatively easy to send messages in Morse but quite difficult to read them correctly. Cate's first message—"Hooray for the holidays"—took about ten minutes to read and she had to be pressed frequently by Tom and Bill to slow down her transmissions. When they had finally worked out her message Tom said: "It'll take too long. We've got to learn the whole code off by heart if this is going to work."

"We'll do it just like memorising passages from *Hamlet*," said Cate. "A bit at a time."

"Let's take the first letters A to I," said Tom, and learn them off."

"And we can come back and hear each other to see how we have got them off," said Bill.

"You stay here with Mary Rose, Cate, and Bill and I will go to our bedrooms."

"Call out when you think you have memorised them," said Cate to the two boys as they left the room with their charts.

"Dit dah," said Mary Rose.

During the rest of the afternoon they memorised the whole of the Morse alphabet. Each of them approached the task differently. Bill worked on similarities. E was dit, I—dit dit, S—dit dit dit. T was dah, M—dah dah and O—dah dah dah. Tom noted that A (dit dah), was the opposite of N (dah dit); B (dah dit dit dit) the opposite of V (dit dit dit dah) and D (dah dit dit) the opposite of U (dit dit dah). Cate said they would both go crazy trying to remember these patterns and she concentrated on learning them off systematically from A to Z.

Later Cate said to the others: "Let's play *This Bird* with the Morse." *This Bird* was a game like *I spy*. You had to guess the identity of the bird in question from hints given by the teller.

"All right," said Tom looking carefully at his sheet of code. "What do P and X have in common?"

"P is dit dah dah dit", said Cate.

"And X is dah dit dit dah", responded Bill.

“So they both have four items of code”, said Cate.
 “And what they have in *uncommon*”, said Bill, “is that the one is the opposite of the other.”
 “Right”, said Tom. “Your go, Cate.”
 “What’s the opposite of J?”
 “What’s J, Tom?” asked Bill.
 “Dit dah dah dah”, he replied. “So we want dah dit dit dit.”
 “B”, responded Bill.
 “Alright. Your turn Bill,” said Tom. “You ask one.”

When they tired of this game, Tom said: “Let’s get the torch and we can practise sending messages in the passage. Come on Pumpkin,” he said. “You can come with me.” When they were sitting at each end of the passage, Tom at one end with Mary Rose and Cate and Bill at the other, Tom sent his message—

W	e	l	l	n	e	e	d
<i>dit dah dah, dit, dit dah dit dit, dit dah dit dit / dah dit, dit, dit, dah dit dit</i>							
2	t	o	r	c			
<i>dit dit dah dah dah / dah, dah dah dah, dit dah dit, dah dit dah dit,</i>							
h	e	s					
<i>dit dit dit dit, dit, dit dit dit.</i>							

Bill called out to him, “What do you mean, *well?*”
 “He means *we ’ll*, don’t you Tom?” asked Cate.
 “Yes,” Tom called back. “We can’t transmit an apostrophe. I should have left out the *we* and made it *will need 2 torches*. Or put in both *we* and *will*.”
 “But sometimes there would be no doubt about what you are trying to say. *D O N T* without the apostrophe couldn’t be anything else, could it?” said Cate.

Their activities were interrupted by the sound of a vehicle.

“Daddy’s home,” said Bill. They stopped what they were doing immediately, leapt to their feet and ran down the stairs and through the front door to where their father’s utility had come to a stop in the driveway. He was getting out of the car.

“Hello, Daddy,” said Bill.

“Hello, Young Bill,” said Mr Ryan as he put his arm around the shoulder of his son. “Hello, Tom. Hello, Cate. Where’s my littlest daughter?”

“Here she is,” said Tom as Mary Rose came running up.

“Hello, Pumpkin,” said Mr Ryan as he lifted her up above his head. “How’s my little girl?” Mary Rose gurgled appreciatively in his arms.

“We doon Morse,” she said seriously to him as he carried her towards the stairs.

“Doing what?”

“Morse,” said Bill. “Mary Rose has been helping.”

“Tom has got a letter from Mark in Morse code,” said Cate so we have all been learning it.”

“True, Tom?” he asked as they started up the steps together.

“Yes. Mark suggested I take it up so we got out your book—I hope you don’t mind—and copied out the Morse chart.”

“Was that Hiscock’s *Cruising under Sail*?” asked his father.

“Yes. That’s the one,” said Tom.

“Of course I don’t mind. That’s what books are for. Provided,” he added as an afterthought, “no one spilt jam on it.”

“We put it away again carefully,” said Cate.

“And I wasn’t even eating jam at the time,” said Bill.

“No,” said Cate. “It was an apple.” The others laughed.

“Hello, Love,” said Mr Ryan greeting his wife at the top of the stairs and he gave her a kiss. “These children haven’t been wasting their time on their day off then.”

“No. Tom got a very timely letter from Mark Parfitt,” she said.

“I must view their efforts after I have had a cup of tea.”